

“Making Room for God in Our Lives”

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¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7, New American Bible, Revised Edition)

Let me just say from the outset -- I realize it is a little early for Christmas. I know the commercials have already started, and I expect you've been in at least one store that is already decked out at least a little. And Home Depot is already all in -- its Christmas shelves are fully stocked right now. And did I buy a few new strands of lights when I walked by those shelves last weekend? Maybe. But I won't open them for a while. Before Halloween is just too early for overt Christmas, even for me.

Nevertheless, I could think of no better passage to illustrate the main idea of today's sermon than the story of Jesus coming into the world, only to find that the first house the Holy Family comes to is closed. What does it say that this part of Luke's beloved story ends with the ominous words, "there was no room for them in the inn"?

At the very least, it clashes with the very different story Anthony just read from 1st Kings, where the widow of Zarephath clearly makes room for the prophet Elijah. Hungry and penniless with a starving child at home, she shares her last scoop of meal with Elijah, making room for a miracle that would soon save her ailing son.¹

In 2nd Kings, a similar story is told about the prophet Elisha. Elisha would often pass through a town called Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived. Whenever Elisha would come through town, she would invite the traveling prophet to share a meal with her family. After a while, she said to her husband, "I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small room, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes through town."² In return for the kindness, Elisha asks if there is anything he can do to help this woman. Although she never dares to ask, Elisha learns that this kind woman had always wanted a child but had never been able to conceive. A short time later, the woman bore a son. And it all began with the basic act of opening her door, making room for a traveler, and creating room for a miracle from God.

I hope you have noticed that, during this stewardship season, we are talking a lot about "making room" – how we at Larchmont Avenue Church make room for mission, make room around our sacramental table, make room for children, make room for gratitude – but all of it really boils down to the idea we are engaging today. How are we – as individuals, as

¹ 1 Kings 17:8-24.

² 2 Kings 4:8-17.



families, as a congregation – making room for God in our lives? If we are making room for God in our lives, I think the other stuff comes fairly easily. So, the key question is, if the Savior came to us today, would the doors of our homes, and the doors of our hearts, be open to Him?

And don't get me wrong. My family and I struggle with all of the same things you struggle with. We are all so heavily scheduled and over-programmed these days. Our calendars are jam packed, and we seem to zip from one thing to the next at 1,000 miles per hour, and it can get exhausting. There just don't seem to be enough hours in the day to get to everything we want to get to.

But as someone who spends a lot of time in and around church, I have a theory about how we are making room these days, and my theory is that, when we get busy, church is the first thing to go. And I also have a theory on why that is. I think church is the thing that drops off the calendar first because it is one of the easier things to drop. What I mean is that we think that the consequences of neglecting our time with God and our time in the body of Christ are not as immediate – perhaps not as obvious -- as the consequences of missing other things.

For example, lots of families are engaged with sports, and I think that is great. But if a child has a weekend game or an evening practice, and they do not show up for that game or practice, then they will likely lose their place in the starting lineup. And who knows, they might just be good enough to get a scholarship in that sport someday, so this time is kind of an investment. The consequences of missing those things are immediate and obvious.

Or maybe you have an after-hours work function – something you'd rather not attend, but has some expectation around it. You wonder, "If I don't go, will people think I am not making work enough of a priority?" Little things add up, so it's safer to show up.

But what are the consequences of skipping out on church? We hear all the time that our God "*is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*"³ If we neglect God, we know that God will understand. And if we miss church, chances are that no one will call us up and demand to know why we weren't there. And then we tell ourselves, "It's OK, because I feel closest to God in nature." And again, that's great, but really – as you look around at the pews and the people who could be in them, how many nature hikes do we really think are going on right now? Still, the point remains – the consequences for not making room for God on a regular basis are just not as immediate and not as obvious as they are for the things that compete for space on our calendars and in our hearts.

However, that does not mean that there are not consequences. There are consequences for neglecting our faith, for not giving time to nourish and cultivate the life of the Spirit. Sure, those things are challenging to quantify, but over time, we can measure them. When we encounter the rough patches in life, and we discover that we have drifted so far from our connection to God that the presence of God seems far away when we need it most, how do we measure that loss? On the other side, if we do work to make room for God in our daily living, in our prayer life, in our lives of service and fellowship, scripture assures us that the fruit of that kind of living are the things that are most important in this life... things like "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*"⁴ How can we measure the blessing of having more of those kinds of things in our

³ Joel 2:13.

⁴ Galatians 5:22-23.

lives? How can you measure the return on that kind of investment. As scripture tells us in James 4, verse 8 “*Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.*” Or, in the words we receive from the prophet Malachi, when God thought the people were not making sufficient room for faith, “*Make room for me,*” says the Lord of hosts, “*put me to the test, and watch me open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.*”

To make that kind of room for God is to embrace the same kind of hope that we see when our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith celebrate the feast of Passover. If you have ever attended a family *seder* meal, and I expect many of you have, you will remember that everyone around the table shares four cups of wine. The cups are powerful symbols and reminders of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, mirroring the four promises of deliverance that Israel received from God: “I will bring you out ... I will deliver you ... I will redeem you ... and I will take you to Me as my people.”⁵

You may also remember that another cup is filled with wine and set aside. That cup is *Kos Eliyahu*, “Elijah’s Cup,” and where it sits, a chair is often purposefully left empty. Jewish tradition teaches that Elijah the prophet will be the messenger who brings word of the coming of the Messiah. When Elijah comes, he will bring with him the good news of God’s redemption. So, in hopeful anticipation, the family pours him a glass, and leaves him a chair. And, at one point in the dinner, children are asked to go and briefly open the door to the house. The kids scramble to get there first. The cup, the chair, and the open door – each is a symbolic act of making room for Elijah, and for God, in that home. It is a reminder to that family to leave room for God’s miracles.

So, yes, it is a little early for Christmas, but that does not mean that we cannot pause to think about what it meant when Mary and Joseph needed a safe, warm place where the infant Jesus could be brought into the world, but when they came to one particular door, the people inside could not, or would not, make room for Him.

Not many years ago there was a church that, like so many others, was working on a Christmas pageant that would help the congregation celebrate that holy night when Christ was born, and there was a little boy named Wally in that congregation who really wanted a part that year. Wally was in the second grade. He should have been in the fourth, but he had already been held back twice. He had a significant learning disability, and reading was very difficult for him. He also found it hard to communicate verbally. But Wally was a wonderful kid – helpful, gentle, kind, and thoughtful. His big, genuine smile made him a favorite of adults and younger kids at church.

When it was time to audition for the annual Christmas pageant, Wally told the director that he wanted to be a shepherd. But the shepherds had a lot of lines. They also moved in and out of most of the scenes, so there were lots of cues to remember. The director didn’t want Wally to get in over his head, so the director cast him in another role: the part of the innkeeper. The innkeeper was only in one scene and had only a few words to remember. That seemed a lot safer.

On the night of the pageant, as the curtain went up, Wally watched intently from the side of the stage. He was entranced by the costumes, the props, and the lights. But when the time came for Joseph to knock on the door of his inn, Wally was right there in position and ready to go. The adrenaline was pumping, and he opened the door a little too hard, and his line came out a bit abruptly, but he nailed his first line.

⁵ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/four-cups-of-wine-on-passover>

"What do you want?" he said.

"We need a room," Joseph replied.

In order to keep it smooth, the director had simplified the dialogue, so all that Wally was supposed to say was, "No room." But the line didn't come. It was exactly what they had feared. All of the sudden, Wally seemed uncomfortable. He pulled at his collar. He stared down at the floor. He knew all eyes were on him. But then, somewhat grudgingly, the words came. He didn't look up, he still seemed uncomfortable, but the words came out: "No room."

A relieved Joseph continued on. "Please good innkeeper, this is my wife. She is great with child and needs a place to rest. Please, can't you find some room for us?"

Wally's next line was the same as the last one. He was supposed say "No room," and close the door. But it was clear that Wally was still struggling. He looked over at the director with pleading eyes, then he turned Mary, and then his eyes went back to the floor. He finally pushed the words out. "No room."

But he did not close the door. A single tear began to trace down Wally's cheek, and he just stood there, watching Mary and Joseph sadly walk away. Suddenly, he cried out, "Wait, don't go! You can have my room!"

Calendars are busy. We have lots of things to do. And perhaps God does not knock as aggressively as the other things in our lives. But the living God is at your door, ready to come in. "*Make room for me,*" God says. "*Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you.*"

Amen.