

## “God of the Living Room”

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12-20-20 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Based on Psalm 89:1-4; Luke 2:1-11

As many of you know, I have a collection of creches or nativity scenes that I put out every Advent as part of my Christmas decorations. They come in all sizes and shapes, from all over the world. Some of them include just Mary, Joseph, and Jesus (born or unborn). Some have the holy family plus a donkey, angel, or shepherd. The larger sets usually have three people who appear to be kings, at least one shepherd and some sheep, and some semblance of a barn-like structure in which to place all the figures. It’s interesting to see who is included and who isn’t. This set, for example, is the only one in my collection which includes people who don’t fit any of the typical roles.<sup>1</sup> When my son helped me put it out this year, we had to consider who these people were. Were they travelers staying in the inn who were curious about what all the excitement was about, or passers-by out for a stroll in Bethlehem that night? The set, which I think comes from Haiti, doesn’t say. Whoever the people are, I have always liked the fact that included among them are children, yet none of them is playing a drum. After all, the idea of a little drummer boy comes from an historically recent T.V. show, not the Bible.

But when you think about it, none of our imagined scenes are strictly biblically accurate. Angels and shepherds are in *Luke* but not in *Matthew*. Visitors from the east are in *Matthew* but not in *Luke*, and they are neither kings nor three in number. So, the nativity scenes we all imagine and love and depict in creches and Christmas pageants actually come from our conflating two different texts, and then adding a few thousand years of legend and tradition too to round out the picture. Honestly, there’s nothing wrong with that to me. I grew up with a creche that had everything from Native Americans and African elephant riders in it, to Bambi and monkeys. I like a good diverse gathering at the birth. Moreover, this year, when circumstances have taken so many of the things we cherished as “normal” away from us, I’m not going to be the one to take away your Christmas traditions too by telling you that you should get rid of any creches that fail to depict Mary accurately as a 14-year-old Middle Eastern girl, and Joseph as an older man, or any that include a donkey or cow, which are not mentioned in the text, or depict a shepherd and king standing side-by-side. Our conflated image still teaches us a lot about God and humankind. It teaches us about how God came for all people, and came into poverty not a life of affluence and power. It teaches us that outcasts and outsiders understood before many insiders did just what had happened, and about the courage and faithfulness of Mary and Joseph. Our image of Jesus’ birth is good.

That being said, however, there are still lessons that we can learn from understanding the most likely historical scenario which we might not appreciate from the typical tableau. One of those lessons has to do with the location of Jesus’ birth, something renown New Testament scholar, seminary professor, author, and Presbyterian missionary Ken Bailey wrote and spoke about a great deal during his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Bailey spent most of his life living in the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> Creche shown in worship which includes a little hut made out of a coconut and tiny clay figures painted in bright colors. See end of sermon for the two images.

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, Ken, “*The Manger and the Inn: A Middle Eastern view of the birth story of Jesus*,” PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK, Dec.

Fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Aramaic as well as English, he knew not only contemporary Middle Eastern cultural practices from his years of living in Lebanon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Jerusalem, but also ancient cultural practices in those regions because he studied them extensively. Because of this knowledge, he had a hard time accepting *Luke's* birth narrative as it has come to be understood, the one that says that Mary and Joseph arrived late at night after days of traveling to Bethlehem for the census, only to discover that there was no room in the inn, thereby necessitating Mary to deliver baby Jesus almost immediately in a stable. The fact that Bailey had questions or concerns did not make him side with the Jesus Seminar scholars, who reject the historicity of the birth narratives entirely, however; Bailey felt that there was a great deal of plausibility as well as theological truth in Luke's account. His problem was that our image doesn't even match what Luke said or most likely meant.

In ancient Middle Eastern culture, Bailey wrote, the laws of hospitality were such that when relatives came to town, and even strangers in many cases, they never would have stayed at an inn.<sup>3</sup> That would have been terrible hospitality by the host city. Visitors almost always stayed with friends or family if any were available. In the case of Joseph and Mary, they had multiple relatives from which to choose. Luke already told us in earlier verses that Mary's cousin Elizabeth lived in the hill country, which would have been only an hour or two from where they needed to register in Bethlehem. So, they could have stayed there. But more importantly, since Joseph was of the house and lineage of David, and Bethlehem was the City of David, he would have had lots of family there. Even if he didn't, his ancestry would have given him a degree of prestige which would have guaranteed that someone would have taken him in. Why then all of this business about an inn? For centuries inn keepers have been condemned through Christmas pageants for saying "No room" to the holy family. For centuries Christians have been asked in Christmas sermons whether we have room for Jesus in our hearts. If there was no inn and people would have readily taken them in, then why did Luke say what he did?

Well, as it turns out, he didn't. If we look at the original text, we discover that Luke did not write "no room in the inn," he wrote "no room in the *kataluma*." The word for a commercial inn, like a Marriot, is *pandokheion* not *kataluma* in the Greek. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan drops off the mugging victim at a *pandokheion* and leaves the inn keeper money to care for him. *Kataluma* appears only one other time in *Luke*, in Chapter 22 when the disciples are told to follow a man carrying a jar of water to ask on Jesus' behalf, "Where is the *kataluma* where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?" Jesus had told his disciples when they did this, the man would show them "a large upper room furnished." In other words, a *kataluma* isn't a Ramada or even a B&B; it is an extra room, or as we would say in our culture, a guest room. The word has just been translated in the west as "inn" for years because when we travel, we usually stay in inns or hotels. In Middle Eastern translations, including in the oldest one in Syriac, however, no such word appears. They just state that there was "no space for them" or "no room."

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21, 2006; see also Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *A Clear View of Jesus' Birth*, educational video posted on Youtube.com, Dec. 3, 2016; available at <https://youtu.be/D6UC1Gzf1s?t=2>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* (for the rest of the discussion of Bailey's position.)

When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, probably not late at night as tradition holds because the text actually says that they were there for a while before “the time came for her to deliver her first child,” they almost certainly stayed with some relatives. But because the census had sent so many people to Bethlehem at the same time, all of the guest rooms their relatives ordinarily would have offered them were already full of other guests. So, they had to stay somewhere else, somewhere where Luke says there was a manger for baby Jesus. Now when we hear manger, we automatically think “stable,” but Luke never mentions one; he just says “manger,” as it turns out, for good reason. In the First Century, most peasants did not keep their mangers in stables. You know where they kept them? In their living rooms.

A typical home in those days was quite simple.<sup>4</sup> Bailey said that often it consisted of only one or two rooms, the main living room or family room, which was also served as the dining room and bedroom, and a kataluma, if there was one at all. These rooms were designed in such a way that you had to walk up a few steps to enter them, like walking from one room to another in a split-level home today. That’s because the animals lived on the very bottom level of the home. During the day they were outside. But in the evening, they were brought inside to be safe. Once inside, they ate standing up out of mangers which were often dug out of the floor on the edge of the living room, almost as if they were eating over the kitchen sink.<sup>5</sup>

Bailey believed, and many now agree with him, that what Luke was saying is that Jesus was born in the living room and laid in one of the mangers there because there was nowhere else to put him. He was born there because the kataluma was already full of other people, so whoever took Mary and Joseph in, gave them their own space— the living room, in which to sleep. In the living room, they would have had bedding and facilities for heating water and everything necessary for the birth, including other women to help with the delivery. Jesus’ being born there would not only make sense according to the architecture and culture of the day, but it also reconciles Luke’s story with Matthew’s, because Matthew says that the magi found Jesus in a house.

For centuries Christians have imagined that Jesus was born in isolation, desperation, and filth. But the more likely reality is that Jesus was born right in midst of a chaotic room filled with family and not enough of the right furniture to make everyone comfortable in the normal way. In other words, he was born into a setting not unlike that found in many of our living rooms today. For so many people across the globe, their living or family room has been practically the whole world for the last nine months. Previously underused by many of us because we were out and about in the world doing whatever we had to do, the living room has now become the classroom and the home office, the dining room, gym, multi-media entertainment room, worship sanctuary,

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<sup>4</sup> Slide shown of standard home depicts two rooms. One is entered by going up three stairs, the other through an outside entrance. See

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.psephizo.com%2Fbiblical-studies%2Fjesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable-honest%2F&psig=AOvVaw1Fj9q8s9EcBjLQegnBE39J&ust=1608757809292000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCNi19oTA4u0CFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD>

<sup>5</sup> Second color image of typical home shown including animals in the “stable” portion of the home. See [https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kenxbriggs.com%2F2010.12.19\\_arch.html&psig=AOvVaw1Fj9q8s9EcBjLQegnBE39J&ust=1608757809292000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCNi19oTA4u0CFQAAAAAdAAAAABAK](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kenxbriggs.com%2F2010.12.19_arch.html&psig=AOvVaw1Fj9q8s9EcBjLQegnBE39J&ust=1608757809292000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCNi19oTA4u0CFQAAAAAdAAAAABAK)

and for some, guest room simultaneously. For months now we have been crammed into pandemic inspired bubbles, tripping over each other trying to get through our days. We need some good news and still aren't supposed to be leaving our homes to find it. Mercifully, Luke gives it to us by telling us effectively that Jesus is in the bubble with us. He's not off in a distant stable somewhere, a setting that unless you do 4-H like my family or have enough land to have your own barn full of farm animals, is unfamiliar to most people. God came into the chaos of people strung out and overwhelmed by what was going on in their world, and conveyed with his arrival, "I don't need anything fancy and don't want to be off by myself. Just scooch over a bit, I'll be born right here next to you."

I love the traditional way of envisioning Jesus' birth depicted innumerable ways on Christmas cards, but this year especially, I love even more Bailey's historical way of understanding the text because it takes our understanding of Jesus being Emmanuel—God-with-us to the next level. It reminds us that Jesus is not high above us on a cloud somewhere watching with detachment, or off in a magical place that can only be found with the intervention and direction of angels and miraculous stars. He is here with us now. Jesus came into chaos so that we might find peace. He came into our homes so that God could abide with us forever.

That's the good news in this text. As far as the challenge goes, (because almost every biblical text, including the happy ones, comes with food for thought), that depends on who you ask. Ken Bailey said that instead of asking ourselves whether we, like the inn keeper, say "No room available" to Jesus, the historical version asks us to consider whether we are willing to give Jesus our best. Whomever Joseph and Mary stayed with probably gave up their own beds so that their guests could be comfortable. Are we willing to say, "Take the best of me and my life first, and I'll make do with the rest?" That's definitely something to think about. But I think an equally valid and perhaps related question that comes out of the historical version is, "If Jesus is here, right here with us in our living rooms, do we acknowledge at all?" Do we go about our days ignoring the baby in the manger or hoping and praying we won't have to stop what we are doing to tend to him and satisfy his desires? Do we trip over Jesus because the manger is in the way of our getting our activities done, and as a result think of him as an obstacle to our happiness? Or do we rearrange the pattern of our days so that we can spend more quality time gazing into his eyes and dreaming about how we can make him smile? Do we show him the awkward, stressed-out reality of our lives as those who believe he cares? Do we hold him tight on bad days knowing that Love incarnate is right there whenever we need him?

That last question especially is worth asking, whether you are stuck in your living room with way too many people or you are stuck there all alone. The good news of the Gospel is not that we have to be bubbled with Jesus but that we get to be. God is that gracious, that generous and understanding. None of us is alone. None of us is cut off without love. Don't ever forget that. If a volleyball with a handprint on it could keep Tom Hanks' character sane for years on a deserted island in the film *Castaway*, then think about what recognizing Jesus in our living rooms could do for our mental and physical health, not the mention the way we treat each other, perceive the news, and plan for the future. Divine love is with us now and plans to stay for Christmas and beyond. Thanks be to God for making our ordinary, messy living rooms holy, and

our lives in all their difficulty, intimately and richly blessed. Amen.



Slides 1 and 2: Creche shown in worship which includes a little hut made out of a coconut and tiny clay figures painted in bright colors.