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Revisionist Christmas
Luke 2:1-7

One of my favorite podcasts is by the author Malcolm Gladwell. If you've ever read *Tipping Point* or *Blink*, you're already familiar with Malcolm Gladwell's style of looking at things that seem familiar or commonplace with a new perspective. Appropriately, he titled his podcast "Revisionist History," and, in his own words, revisits things in history that have been "overlooked or misunderstood." He covers everything from higher education to basketball free throws to trials during the height of the civil rights era. I love this podcast because I take particular delight in learning something new about things I had lots of assumptions about already, taking a new angle that may in fact be getting at the truth of the matter.

So for this reason, I want to take this first Sunday of Christmas and look back for my own little revisionist history, a Revisionist Christmas if you will. Today, I want to look at a story we know well, or we think we know well. It's the story of Mary and Joseph coming into Bethlehem, finding no room in the inn, and being forced to bring our Lord into this world in a stable, all for lack of hospitality. I bet, even without being a fervent Bible reader, that you could tell me about the pregnant Mary and the noble Joseph, knocking on the door of the inn, and the innkeeper rejecting them, and, perhaps with a little compassion, lighting their way to a stable out back. You know this story well, and in fact, less than a week ago, our children did a marvelous job bringing that story to life.

But what if I told you that there was no innkeeper? Go ahead, look in any of the Gospels, see if you can find one. He's not there. In fact, what if I told you there was no inn at all, and no stable away from the comfort of home? That the story you know and love didn't really happen, or at least the way you think it happened?

Our revisionist Christmas begins with a scholar named Kenneth Bailey, who died just two years ago. When I was in seminary, I had the privilege of attending a guest lecture of his. Professor Bailey was one of the foremost New Testament scholars in the world, but his story begins when he and his wife became missionaries in Egypt, and then in Lebanon. Bailey in fact spent most of his professional life in the Middle East, and his view of the New Testament is shaped largely by his time spent there.

Due to his location in the world, one of his favorite research pastimes was to take New Testament stories and parables and present them to locals, particularly folks like Bedouins whose culture had remained largely similar to the agricultural and nomadic peoples in the time of Jesus. He found that many of their interpretations of some of our most familiar New Testament stories were substantially different, because they had

deeper understandings of the cultural norms that are unspoken, but undergird the stories.

That's where we get to the story of the manger and the inn. Needless to say, like all people, we project our own cultural assumptions and norms on the story. For example, entering an ancestral but unfamiliar town, we assume that Joseph and Mary obviously had to seek lodging at a public inn, being strangers themselves. When they don't find any, due to crowding, they're put out, effectively homeless, lodging with farm animals out back in a barn.

But when presented to rural Middle Easterners, even of today, that interpretation is laughable. In fact, here's how somebody familiar with the culture would instead read it: Seeing that Joseph is from the house and line of David, and that Bethlehem is the city of David, Joseph should be able to knock on any one of a number of doors in the city and find a relative of some sort, even a distant one, who would be honor-bound to take him and Mary in. If Joseph couldn't find somebody who would take him in, he would be ridiculed as incompetent, unable to do the most basic task in taking care of his family. In fact, hospitality culture was so great, that it's unlikely that a public inn would even be available in a town like Bethlehem at all - they'd never have any business!

Okay, then what of the inn mentioned in the text? Well, here we have to do a deep dive into Greek. Translators have been translating the Greek word that Luke uses, *katalyma*, as "inn" since the time of the King James Version, but more modern scholars agree that it's a poor translation. Instead, they like the more literal translation - "upper room." In fact, *katalyma* is the word Luke uses to speak of the upper room that Jesus and his disciples eat the Passover in. It's not a public inn - it's a room for guests in a home! And this makes sense, because archeologists tell us that most average homes during the time of Jesus in that area would have had a larger lower area and a single upper room where people would sleep.

And how about that stable? Well, there's no talk of a stable at all, just a manger or feeding trough, which would have been located in the first floor of that house, not a separate building. Indeed, the animals belonging to an average family would have been taken inside the family's house at night. They simply wouldn't have had the money to have a separate outbuilding for animals that they could keep secure, so the livestock slept in the family house with everybody else.

So given what we know now, let's reconstruct the story of Joseph and pregnant Mary entering the city of Bethlehem, based on a closer reading of the text. This is Joseph's ancestral hometown, so he announces himself as a son of Bethlehem, and is welcomed in to a distant relative's house. But he and Mary aren't the only ones, so when they get

inside, they find that other relatives have already come to town because of the census. That means there's no room in the upper room to sleep - the "inn" in our Bibles. And so they make their temporary home downstairs, with the animals at night, in an incredibly crowded peasant home, probably for months. And during that time, Mary gives birth inside, in a warm home, full of the love and care of family, and even though they are poor, they make a place for Mary's son in a feeding trough, whom she names Yeshua, or to us, Jesus.

That's a different story. Certainly a more historically plausible one and one that fits the text better.

Perhaps about now you're wishing you'd slept in or gone to brunch this morning, because I've just ruined centuries of Christmas pageants. So I'd better at least make a good point about it, right?

I'd like us to spend a little time reexamining our traditional interpretation of this story, which usually goes like this: When Jesus was born, the people rejected him and made no room for him, just like people today don't have room in their hearts for Jesus, because our hearts are too full of the love of others, less worthy things, and so let us prepare better than that innkeeper or those people of Bethlehem did for this Christmas season.

That interpretation isn't a bad message, for sure, and I agree we ought to make room. The metaphor holds, even if the facts don't. But there's something else in the text not to miss - it's that Jesus was in fact welcomed, and room was made, even if the only room to offer was essentially a fold-out couch and a borrowed laundry basket for a crib. Jesus was welcomed with open arms, although not by the elite or wealthy. Instead, he was welcomed by poor working class folks who would never say no to a distant family member coming through town. Think of it like this - Mary gave birth to her son in the basement of her second cousin's house, not out of lack of hospitality, but because they'd already put up 8 other relatives in guest bedrooms already.

The first story, of Jesus denied by the innkeeper, perhaps resonates more with us, because we readily acknowledge, myself included, that it's easy to push Jesus to the side. But the second story, the one that much more likely happened, that's the story about the people who already willingly and without hesitation make room for Jesus and Jesus' people.

This isn't just idle, academic speculation. It matters for us to understand that the people of ancient Bethlehem were radically hospitable people. Often when I talk about what mission is for a church, I say that first, before we go out and serve, we need spend some time noticing that God is at work through plenty of people already, and perhaps through

people we don't expect. That mission is about noticing that people who may be poor or marginalized are typically already doing God's work of caring for their own communities through whatever means possible. And then, mission means following those people and joining them in their work.

So let's do that in the text today. Let's notice that God's already out there. Where? In the working class folks of Bethlehem, who extended hospitality that would make any one of us comfortable, and by that were ministering to the Son of God long before they knew who he was at all, but simply because he was a child of God.

And finally, let's consider our task in this Christmas season to find how we can come alongside those who already are doing so much to love and serve with what they have, without regard for discomfort or inconvenience. Let us look around for the ministers of God in our own city, and country, and world, who know only how to selflessly love and give of themselves. You know who they are. They come from a long line of people, they trace their spiritual ancestry through the manger in Bethlehem, and they welcome us to come alongside in their good work.

Perhaps you remember a story I told last year after a group of members of GPC traveled to Niger with our partner, the Remember Niger Coalition. Remember Niger helps fund church-run schools throughout the country which are considered amongst the best in the country, and we spent a week visiting the schools in order to understand their work and mission. One day, were visiting their largest school, a boarding school with hundreds of students, and we stopped by the kitchen, which was two large pots for cooking millet. And then we went to the storehouse, which was nearly empty - perhaps not even enough food for one more meal.

But that's not the real story, or at least the end of it. The real story is the one they told next, which was that the teachers and administrators had decided to forgo any pay at all, and take their wages into town to buy millet to feed their students. When faced with a terrible challenge, and in a place where teachers often walk off the job regularly for lack of pay, these teachers chose to give what they had to care for the children amongst them. The real story was not that they are poor, although they are. The real story is that long before we got there to offer any help, they, with God's help, had already cared for those most in need.

These are the characters in the Christmas story that don't get attention in the pageant. The distant family members, working class folks, who would have been ashamed to deny the Holy Family a room. The teachers who feed their children at any cost. And they all went out of their way to share what little they had to welcome and care for the Children

of God into the world with no consideration for money or status. These are the unsung heroes of the Nativity. These are the ministers of God at Christmas.

There are countless people around the world who right now welcome Jesus with joy, making as much room as they possibly can in their lives. They welcome him in their songs and praise, and they welcome him by welcoming and feeding the stranger as if they were family, giving all they have and all they are, for love of a common human family.

Friends, there's always room in Jesus' family home, and plenty of people are there already. And there is room for us as well. Merry Christmas.