

THE INNKEEPER'S DEFENSE

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

You probably think I am a villain. Most people do. In your Christmas programs children line up to play shepherds, wise men, and angels; no one wants to play me.

I can't blame them. It isn't easy running a business. Taxes are high; theft and vandalism are even higher. You know, travelers are the worst customers. Since they don't expect to come back, they don't care how they treat you or your property. They arrive expecting everything to be perfect, and they leave expecting me to clean up their mess.

It's worse when it's crowded, and that week it was very crowded. Every room in the city was booked on account of the Roman census. Now there is a case of bureaucracy if I ever saw one. Normally you take a census by counting people where they live, right? Not the Romans. They got the bright idea of counting people according to where their ancestors lived. It was chaos. People all over the country had to travel back to their ancestral home to register. Bethlehem was flooded, not because so many people lived here but because so many people claimed to be descendants of King David and had to register in David's ancestral home of Bethlehem.

I did the best I could. I had cots and mats spread over every inch of floor space. I tripped over ten people just going to the bathroom. Then this young couple shows up in the middle of the night. No reservations. What was I supposed to do? Kick people out of their beds? I could see she was pregnant; that's why I tried to help. I gave them the only floor space I had: a stall for one of the donkeys. It wasn't bad...a little drafty maybe, but at least it was out of the weather.

How was I to know she would give birth that night? The first I heard about it was from the shepherds.

I never cared much for shepherds. I know King David was a shepherd, but most of the shepherds I knew were foul-smelling, foul-talking drunks. That night several of them showed up at my door wanting to know if I had a baby. I told them to sober up, but they said they were sober. They said an angel told them that a Savior had been born. The angel said they would find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. I told them to get lost, and I was just about to shut the door when I stopped. "Wait a minute," I said. "Did you say lying in a manger?"

"That's what the angel told us," they said.

"Come on," I said, and grabbing my robe I took them out to the barn.

Sure enough, there was the man and woman and their new baby lying in a cattle trough wrapped in some old rags. The father managed a weak smile. "It's a boy," he said. "We named him Jesus."

"So the angels were right," said one of the shepherds.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "What else did the angels say?"

"They said he was the Christ, the Messiah, the promised King who would bring God's righteousness and peace to the world."

Well, the shepherds went on jabbering among themselves, but I went back to the house. Messiah, ha! We don't need any more messiahs. Every few years someone comes along claiming to be the Messiah. Most of them are executed by the Romans. Besides, what kind of Messiah is this? A baby in a cattle trough? No army, no weapons, no followers except some mangy shepherds. Did God really expect to bring peace on earth through someone like that?

In the morning the family found a place to stay in a house down the street, and I put them out of my mind, until two weeks later when the astrologers showed up. I could tell from the way they were dressed that they weren't here for the census. "Where is he who was born King of the Jews?" they asked.

"No kings around here," I said. "Try the palace in Jerusalem."

"We were just there," they said. "They told us to look in Bethlehem."

I laughed. "There haven't been any kings around here since David," and I was just about to shut the door when I stopped. "Wait a minute," I said. "A couple weeks ago there were some shepherds here looking for a king. I'll show you what I showed them."

I took them down the street to the house where the mother, father, and child were staying. When the astrologers entered and saw the child, they knelt before him and presented him with gifts--expensive gifts. I was amazed. First some shepherds and then some pagan star-gazers were worshiping this Jewish kid as if he were their king. "Who is this child?" I wondered. "And if he is really a king, why are the only people who know about it some shepherds and foreigners?"

That was the last time I saw him. A few days later his parents left in the middle of the night, and I never heard from them again. But the next day some soldiers from Herod came looking for a male baby. I don't think they wanted to worship him.

I never heard about him again until about thirty years later. Then I began hearing stories from some of my guests who came from Galilee. They told about a man named Jesus—same name as the kid in the manger. It's a common name, but I wondered if it was the same person. They said he healed people like Elijah, and gave bread to people in the wilderness like Moses. They said he was the Messiah, the promised King, which was exactly what the angels had said about the baby.

Well, if he is the Messiah, he didn't last any longer than the other messiahs. I heard that Pilate finished what Herod set out to do when he was born. His body was wrapped in cloths and laid in a borrowed tomb, just like my borrowed manger. Apparently the world had no more room for him than I did.

It's a shame though. So many hopes were wrapped up in that child: a Savior, a King, one who would bring peace on earth and goodwill to all. I wish it were true.

Recently, however, some of the visitors to my inn from Jerusalem said it was true—that he really was a king. They said some angels appeared to his followers announcing that he was risen from the dead. Angels again. Well, they were right the first time. I wondered if they were right about this.

But if it is true, if he really is alive, I wonder if people still have room for him. Would you open your doors to a Savior that came in the form of a baby born to homeless couple? Would you open your life, your heart to a King whose reign leads to a cross?

You see, I'm not a villain. I'm just like you. I'm an ordinary business man trying to make a living. But sometimes I wonder what I am living for. There is something wrong in a life with no room for others, no room for people in need, no room for the lonely or helpless, no room for God. I have decided that for some things you have to make room. Maybe you do, too.

- Ken Onstot
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