



December 25, 2023

**“No Room in the Inn (Guest Quarters),
But Welcome Room in the Family Space”**

When we attend a worship service, how often do we find ourselves moving to the familiar seat or pew where we have sat before? When we do, we frequently see folks we have seen before, and shared brief greetings or longer stories, or even matters close to our heart. It is a wonderful Christian experience to expect someone looking forward to your presence, and to look forward to their presence, as well.

However, we have a different experience when we either choose to sit in another location in the sanctuary, or have to look for another chair because someone is already occupying our familiar seat. When that happens, we risk expanding our faith-welcome with someone we don't know as well, but might find them to be a true gift-friendship.

With these two pictures of where we may sit in sacred spaces, I am asking you for a moment, to consider sitting in a different seat when it comes to the familiar Christmas story of Jesus' birth in a manger, because “there was no room in the inn”.

Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian minister and teacher at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon, years ago challenged me to sit in such a different seat, when it comes to how we faithfully seek to understand the Bethlehem birth story of Jesus. So, I

invite you to sit in this different pew, and prayerfully consider what his near eastern village life-experience provided, to not diminish, but to deepen his faith. The pictures evoked by the two words, “inn”, and “manger” look very different from this pew.

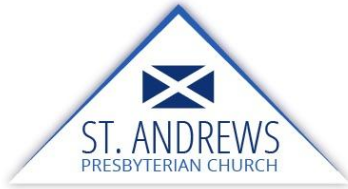
The word here for “inn”, in that near eastern culture, looks more like what we would call “a guest room”. That is the picture which Luke is painting when he speaks of Jesus having his disciples prepare “the guest room” for his last Passover meal (Luke 22:11). This room was often a space above the main living quarters, accessed by a stairway. Luke chooses to use a different word for “inn” when he recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan providing for the on-going lodging of the wounded traveler.

The second word, “manger” is not a space in separate quarters for animals, as in a barn or stable. Many of the near-eastern homes made room for their animals in their home. Picture something like a triplex in which a half-stairway goes to the lower level where there would be an outdoor access for the animals to enter for the night and return outside during the day. At the level of their head height would be the floor level of the main family space, and at the edge of this family space there were indentations in the floor, or, “mangers” to receive hay that would be at a level the animals could reach for eating. Their body heat would also give warmth to the family at night.

So, how might sitting in this pew challenge and deepen our faith? What we might hear anew, is how a household in Bethlehem, faithful to the amazing hospitality of near-eastern families, offered travelers returning to the City of David, first their guest room = “inn”, located above the main family space; and then when there was no room in that guest space, they made room for the Holy Family right in their own living, eating, and sleeping space next to the “manger”. Sitting in this pew, we may see in a new way, how God is most interested in locating the birthplace of his Son, not in a separate stable outside our lives, and not in a separate Guest Room, but rather but in the very heart and hearth of our animal pet-warmed family space where we eat and sleep, and center our being.

~Written by Rev. Dr. Bruce Brooks

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8190 Lincoln Rd. Beulah, MI 49617
231.882.4241
www.benziestandrews.com



Benzie St. Andrews | 8190 Lincoln Rd, Beulah, MI 49617

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