



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 December 14, 2025
 The Third Sunday of Advent
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 “The Advent Crowd”

Luke 2:1-7

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room

The Advent Crowd

“Guest room”?

“Guest room”?

Did you hear that?

*Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the **guest room!***

I thought it was ‘no room in the inn’?

When the New Revised Standard Version, the translation that we use every Sunday here at Westminster, was updated in 2021, they changed the verse.

Turns out, there was no place in the guest room!

Having heard the other version all our lives, we tend to think of Mary and Joseph, alone, destitute, nowhere to go, settling in a cold outdoor barn, because they got turned away from the inn.

And some of us might even be able to relate to that:

We had a very brief moment like that when Auden, our daughter, was born.

It was brief.

But, it didn't feel brief.

Joseph, our firstborn, was a long time coming. He was a week late, followed by 30 hours of labor. Ask Lindsey about it sometime. It was...it was something.

Auden was the opposite. She was quick.

She was born at a birthing center, not a hospital. Lindsey had minor contractions all that day...if you can really ever call contractions 'mild.' I wouldn't really know.

She really started to go into labor, about dinnertime.

But judging by the last time, we still thought she had a while.

So, we waited. Until, about 8:00pm, when we called the Midwife on call to meet us at the Birth Center.

Then, we headed to the Birth Center.

We got there before the Midwife.

And the Birth Center was all locked up and empty, because it was a Saturday.

So we waited...

And waited.

And, suddenly, the contractions, which had been pretty far apart, started getting closer together. And closer together.

And the midwife still wasn't there.

I can still picture the look in Lindsey's face, gritting her teeth through a contraction, as I wondered if she was going to have a baby in the parking lot.

In reality, we might have waited there 15 minutes, before the midwife and nurse came. It felt longer. And I wasn't the one in labor.

We tend to think of Mary and Joseph alone, destitute, the door to the inn shut in their face.

But seeing the change in the Bible translation, to ‘guest room’ got me wondering.

I’ve been reading up this week, about the *guest room*.

It started with a blog post, from Sarah Bessey, entitled: “Everything You Know About the Nativity is Probably Wrong.”¹

If you get a chance to read that post, I’d recommend it.
Sarah Bessey also talks about one of her birth stories, too.
And in her case, the midwife was too late.

She delivered her son in a parking lot, by herself. Yea.

And then I read a book by Kenneth Bailey, a Bible scholar who lived in the middle east, for like, 40 years.²

And they both agreed, that our modern idea of ‘no room in the inn,’ is all wrong.

First off, when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered in their hometown, people in the middle east wouldn’t have traveled alone. Mary and Joseph wouldn’t have arrived in Bethlehem all by themselves. It just wasn’t safe. They would have been in a caravan of Pilgrims.

And also, in the ancient middle east, when a stranger knocked on a door, they weren’t turned away. In fact, turning away someone at your door, especially someone whose family was descended from your town, like Joseph was, would have been deeply shameful. Ancient Israel was a hospitality-bound culture.

And finally, a poor town like Bethlehem back then, would have been made up of a bunch of small houses, each with only two rooms: a guest room, and a family room.

And that’s literally what the Greek word in this passage says: there was no room in any of the guest rooms.

¹ Sarah Bessey, “Everything You Know About the Nativity is Probably Wrong.” Substack: Sarah Blessey’s Field Notes. December 4, 2025. <https://sarahbessey.substack.com/p/why-everything-you-know-about-the-5af>.

² Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 26-37.

Why?

Because Bethlehem was such a welcoming place, people already had taken up all the guest rooms.

But there was another room: the family room.

And, it turns out, in ancient Israel, the family room, was the place where people kept their manger.

Again: *Why?*

Because nobody had heat.

So everybody kept the animals inside the family room for warmth.

And most people just had a few animals.

And they didn't want them wandering off or getting stolen outside.

The family room, in most houses, had a place for the family, then it had some stairs, and then it had a manger, where the animals slept.

You see what I'm getting at?

It's not that the people of Bethlehem shut their doors on Mary and Joseph. In fact, it was the opposite. After they had invited everyone in, until their guest rooms were full, they then started inviting travelers into their family rooms too! To stay with the family and their animals.

Mary and Joseph weren't alone.

People went out of their way to make sure they surrounded, and welcomed, and cared for.

Now, you're probably asking yourself, if this is true: does it mess up Christmas?

I don't think so!

It doesn't change the fact that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were still immigrants and refugees, and Mary had to give birth far from home in a manger.

They were still poor and lowly travelers, running around trying to appease the tyrants Caesar and Quirinius, who wanted to count everyone, right?

So they could tax everybody.

It's just that, Mary and Joseph weren't alone.

A community gathered, in Bethlehem, on the outskirts of the empire, to care for one another.

The Advent of God came about, not in loneliness but in a community of care gathered, opening their homes to each other, in a time of great trial and tyranny.

Maybe it's hard for you and me to picture them like that.

Maybe, we like to think of Mary and Joseph all alone, because we can relate to it.
Because we feel alone.

I heard an Advent sermon this week, by a Lutheran minister, named Edmund Steimle.

This is how he opened his Advent sermon. It's a great line. He said:

A nationally known newspaper columnist wrote, not long ago, there is a sense of loneliness in the country, even of helplessness and doubt about the fidelity of our institutions.³

Let me repeat that:

A nationally known newspaper columnist wrote, not long ago, there is a sense of loneliness in the country, even of helplessness and doubt about the fidelity of our institutions.

Do you want to know when that Lutheran pastor opened his Advent sermon with those words? He gave that sermon on the Protestant Hour radio show in December of 1970.

55 years ago.

Those words could just as easily have been preached today.

³ Edward A. Steimle, "High Road in the Wilderness." Day1 Podcast. December 14, 2025. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/692dbf936615fb284b009499/high-road-in-the-wilderness-episode-4212-rev-dr-edmund-a-steimle-isaiah-4015-december-14-2025>

Doesn't it also feel today, like our institutions are breaking down, whether that be government, or the community, or even the church? Our bonds are getting looser. Communities of care, so prevalent, so assumed in the days of the Gospel, that Luke doesn't even think to mention it.

They are disintegrating today.

So maybe the reason the image of the lonely Mary and Joseph, cast out of the inn of Bethlehem, appeals to us, is because we relate to it.

Another example of the loss, of the community of care, today:

There is currently sitting on the docket of the TN state legislature a bill that would allow public schools to turn away students, *children*, because of their immigration status. As the bill put it, it would "authorize schools to refuse to enroll students who are unlawfully present in the United States."⁴

That, is the loss of the community of care.

Children don't normally get a say, in where their parents take them. And they could be turned away, from school, here in this state. The loss of the community of care.

A bit more than a week ago, I attended a Knox County School Board meeting, where the school board took a vote about whether or not to publicly oppose this bill and to say out loud that Knox County is committed to educate all students.⁵

And, let me tell you: a community of care showed up.

You know, sometimes, in this point of the sermon, I like to pick out one good, poignant moment to illustrate my point.

And, trust me, there were a lot of beautiful moments that night.

Like, when one of our school board members came to the microphone, and she said, "You know, some people are saying, that immigrants are asking for a handout, and don't deserve to be in school."

⁴ <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=HB0793&ga=114>

⁵ A video of that meeting can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/live/MlEoUhPE1pY?si=eHxV7FaMhqvkwuMh>

But, this school board member said, in reality:

Immigrants contribute \$314 million a year in taxes in the state of TN. And undocumented individuals pay an average of 28% of their income in taxes.

And then, in another poignant moment that night, our Knox County School Board, voted, in a bipartisan way, to affirm its commitment to educate all students, *all students*, and to speak against the bill in our legislature.

I could highlight either of those moments, that speech, or that vote.

But this isn't just a School Board story.

I could also point out the way the churches in our community came out to support all students that night.

And I'm not talking about myself here. In fact, some of you know, that it took a lot of prompting, from several of you all, to get me to go to that meeting.

I care about justice.

But I am shy.

But I'm so glad that I was there. Because there, I saw my colleagues I knew.

I saw many other pastors and church leaders I did not recognize.

I could talk about that.

Or: another moment from that night, I could highlight: a woman I don't know, but who is active in one of the groups advocating for education for all, came up to me, and she asked me what church I was from.

And when I said 'Westminster,' she said, "Oh. Isn't that the church that was pushing for immigrant rights at the last Justice Knox meeting?"

And I knew exactly what she was talking about.

So I said 'Yes.'

Because a month ago, I saw Andrew McDonald from Westminster, stand up in front of 300 people and speak brilliantly about supporting immigrant rights at a Justice Knox meeting.

I could highlight that moment, too.
But, honestly, this isn't just a church story.
And its not a Westminster story, either.

Honestly, that night was about something bigger than any single moment, even bigger than the school board vote itself.

It was a community coming together:

People of different races, backgrounds, faiths, even political affiliations, hundreds showing up, speaking up, writing letters and emails, or coming before the School Board, coming together in the face of political power and pressure, coming together in the face of the forces of exclusion, prejudice, and fear.

To say:

“No. We are a community of care.”
And we will care for every child in our community.
No matter their background, or status.

I wish I could convey to you what that looked like.

Because I've got to think, that's what it looked like, back in Bethlehem.

God's collective community, God's watchful community, bringing in those made to feel like outsiders, breaking out into unexpected practices of care.

We have trouble picturing that ancient night.
For so long, we've thought of them all alone, Mary and Joseph turned away, lonely and forgotten.

It's so hard to picture them with a community surrounding them.

I wish I could convey to you what that looked like.

But come to think of it: you've seen it.
You don't need me.

You see it. Every time you show up.

In and outside these walls.
Every time you show up.
For your community.
For the lowly.
For your neighbor.
For your family.
For the stranger.
Every time you show up, you see it.

You see them.

On nights like that, and, well, look around you.
On mornings like this.

It's not so hard, is it?
To picture Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

The Advent of God.
The Advent of God. In a community of care.