

The Advertisements of Advent: No Vacancy Luke 2:1-5

This year during Advent at these special midweek services we're going to consider "The Advertisements of Advent". We're going to take advertising slogans or signs and apply them to the story of Jesus' birth.

I doubt there is anyone here who has not been on a car trip somewhere far from home, searching for a place – a motel or hotel -- to spend the night, and experienced the dreaded "No Vacancy" sign, sometimes flashing its gloomy and doom-laden message in cheery neon tones, as if it were something to be applauded. If you've been really unlucky you hit town at the height of some major event about which you knew nothing, and there are so many "No Vacancy" signs flashing it looks like Christmas at the North Pole. There's a particular kind of sinking feeling that accompanies the sighting of one of these signs because you know two things: first, you might be sleeping in the car tonight, and, second, the motel owner is inside, warm and cozy and smug because he has all his rooms rented and he doesn't care that you're going to spend the night freezing in your car.

Now, I told you at the outset that we were going to apply these signs of our times to the time of Jesus and the Nativity story, and if your mind has not already make the connection between the

“No Vacancy” sign and the story of the innkeeper who had no room for Mary and Joseph that night, you may have had a little too much soup at the soup supper and dozed off there for a minute.

For centuries, pastors, me included, have taken great joy in raking that hapless innkeeper over the coals for his cold-heartedness in not finding a place in his inn for the Holy Family. Usually we go from there to making an analogy between his having no room in his inn for the Savior, and the world having no room in its collective and individual hearts for Him.

But let’s take a fresh look at the story. Realistically, the poor guy was caught between a rock and a hard place. I mean, OK, if he had known that the Savior of the world and the Son of God needed a place to be born, I’m sure he would have ejected someone else, or maybe given up his own place for Mary and Joseph. But, for all he knew, these were just two of the many, many people who had descended upon Bethlehem to register for the Roman census. I have no idea how many people had to make their way to that tiny little town to register, but it was all the male descendants of King David, and David was king 900 years earlier. We can only imagine how many of his lineal descendants were alive in Israel at the time. Bethlehem was famous as the birthplace of David, but it’s not as if they had a thriving tourist

industry going with multiple inns and hundreds of rooms available.

Then, too, we have to give the poor guy some credit for finding them someplace to sleep. He could have just told them “tough luck” and sent them away with nothing. So maybe we’ve been a little harsh with the innkeeper over all this time and he deserves a little more credit. The “No Vacancy” sign, figuratively, was out at his inn, but he went the extra mile, extended himself a little and did a kind thing for a young couple – and because of that his stable is the most famous in the world.

To move toward applying this “No Vacancy” sign to a deeper level, the fact is that if we are applying it to the human condition, it is a misnomer. Blaise Pascal, an 18th C. French philosopher wrote:

“There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator.”

The problem, you see, is not that there is “No Vacancy” in the human heart; it’s that there is a HUGE VACANCY in the human heart! It is an enormous vacuum that is supposed to be filled with God, which was filled with God when He created Adam and Eve. But when they chose to sin against God, they cast Him out of their hearts, and ever since, in the heart of every human being from the

moment of their conception, there has been a huge, sucking vacuum there.

The problem is not that there is No Vacancy; it is that huge, gaping, enormous vacancy that is supposed to be occupied by the Creator.

That is the void, the vacuum, the emptiness, the vacancy that Jesus was born to fill up.

The problem is, as Pascal correctly noted, since the first sin, humans have been attempting to fill that vacancy with everything but what it was designed for, everything but God.

People sense that there is something missing in life, something essential that is absent in their lives. So they try to fill it up, to plug that hole. And often they do it with good things. They reason,

- if I can be a success at my chosen vocation, that will fill the void; or,
- if I can make a lot of money, that will make me feel complete; or,
- if I can find the right person to share my life I won't feel so empty; or,
- if I have children and give myself to raising them I banish this feeling of something being missing in my life; or,

- I will study and fill my head with knowledge; or
- I'll make many, many friends in cyberspace through the social media, for how can my life be vacant if I have 3000 Facebook Friends?

Good things, some of them. Some worthy things. Not a thing wrong with any of them. And even the less desirable ones aren't bad. But, as worthy and as laudable as might be, they don't work to fill that vacancy.

Even more sadly, too often people choose terrible, destructive things to fill that space:

- they start abusing drugs; or,
- they pour alcohol into that hole in their heart; or,
- they get involved in bizarre philosophies or cults; or,
- destructive relationships.

And, then, today, we have a relatively new category. People almost get it, but just miss it. They recognize, perhaps, that this is a spiritual vacancy that needs to be filled, but they go about it in the wrong way. They get into modern-day idol worship.

In ancient times, people made idols of wood or stone. They invested them with all kinds of story lines and history, with false power and attributes, and bowed to them and made sacrifice, sometimes horrible sacrifice to them.

Modern people are too sophisticated for that. We create our idols but we do it in a different way. The accepted religion of our time is Buffet Spirituality. So a person takes this belief from this religion and this belief from another religion, and this aspect of the god of this religion, and another aspect which they like from the god of another religion. And in so doing, they create an idol no less than the primitives of ancient times. It may not be of wood or stone, but it is an idol nonetheless because it is false, bearing no relationship to the one, true God of the Old and New Testaments. And, like all the other futile attempts, it will not fill that vacancy in the heart.

The only thing, the only thing that will fill that gaping emptiness is God, who designed it for Himself. To do otherwise is to be reminded of a one-year old trying to do one of those cut-out wooden puzzles. I have watched my children and grandchildren and others, in their infancies, try to put pieces into puzzles like that. Their faculties of perception are not fully developed and their spatial abilities have yet to be honed, so they try inappropriate pieces in inappropriate spaces and don't seem to comprehend why they don't fit.

So must our gracious God view the futile attempts of mankind to fill that God-shaped hole in the heart with inappropriate fillings.

Jesus came to fill that void and only He will do. By His death and resurrection He makes it possible for Himself to come and enter into our sinful hearts where He sweeps out that vacancy and takes up residence. By faith He makes His home within our hearts and only then do we feel complete, only then do we know that peace which all people seek but which can only be had through Him, that peace that passes human understanding.

Take every opportunity God gives you this Advent and Christmas season, when peoples' eyes are turned toward the stable and the manger to help them fill that vacancy in their hearts. Pray for the chance to tell others about the only thing that will make them complete, the Savior who came for them as a Child in Bethlehem.