

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
12.24.25
Christmas Eve

Merry Christmas, St Martin's!

She laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

But this may not have looked at all the way we picture it today, the way our nativity scenes show it, the holy family in a barn, out in the middle of nowhere.

Many scholars today think we have been misled by the word "inn." That the Greek word that has been translated in our Gospel reading as "inn" might be better translated as "guest room."

The other clue that we may be imagining this story wrong is Middle Eastern hospitality, in Jesus' time and even today.

Imagine it. Joseph was taking his new wife Mary to his ancestral home of Bethlehem. Maybe Joseph had never been there before, maybe he had never met his distant relatives. But even so, it would have been unthinkable for Joseph to go back to the hometown of his family, and basically stay in a hotel anonymously. As soon as he got into the census line, and said, Hi, I'm Joseph, son of Heli, son of Mathat, son of Levi, he would have found relatives who would have welcomed him and insisted that he and his wife stay the night.

Some of us who have families elsewhere may know what I'm talking about. If Joseph tried to slip through Bethlehem without being noticed, distant family members would be offended. So the problem for Joseph and Mary would not be, where are we going to stay, so much as, how will we get any privacy?

She laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Private homes in Jesus' time were often laid out in three levels. On the second level was the family's living quarters. On the third level there was an upper room for guests. It is this kind of room that Jesus and his friends used to eat their Passover supper the night before Jesus was arrested, and the

Greek word which in today's Gospel is translated as "inn" is the same word used in the story of the Last Supper for "upper room."

And then there is the first level of the home. On the first level there was a place to shelter the family's animals for the night. Unless the family was very wealthy, they usually didn't have a separate barn, but simply brought their few animals inside at night to this area below the second floor living quarters.

She laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guest room.

Maybe other visiting relatives were already staying upstairs in the third floor guest room. Maybe the guest room was very small -- maybe it literally did not have enough room for a woman in labor and a midwife to assist her. The host family couldn't fit Mary and Joseph and their new baby upstairs in their usual guest quarters, so they put them up in their other guest quarters downstairs, along with the family animals.

They were not isolated away from an inn full of guests, but right in the heart of the family home. They were not rejected, but welcomed, taken in, and surrounded by the host family, likely a midwife, and the family animals. By the time the shepherds and angels arrived, it was a crowded and noisy party!

This season, I have been reflecting on my nearly one year with this St Martin's community. It has been a big adjustment for me to live in a new city, a new state, after being a NY-state person my whole life. It has been a big adjustment for my wife and me to be commuting to see each other. But it is all working out beautifully, because of the hospitality and welcome of so many people in this community. I have found myself grateful for all the connections I have made, from a car mechanic to a regular coffee shop to a vet, thanks to you. For everyone who has welcomed me into their home for a meal, or greeted me warmly out on the Avenue. I am so thankful for the crew who made it possible for Alleyne and me to move into the rectory for Christmas.

Mary and Joseph, welcoming their new child that first Christmas in that crowded first floor guest room, must have felt immense relief and gratitude as they rested after the birth. They had faced a much more difficult journey than what I have experienced, a much more difficult journey than most of us can imagine. Mary and Joseph had to walk for several days, on dangerous roads. They may have had to sleep by the side of the road. They may not have gotten much sleep at all. They likely had many worries about the reason for their trip. What was this census? What would the new taxes be? Would they be able to afford to eat after paying them?

The welcome they received from the host family, after all they had been through, must have felt so sweet.

It is into this welcome, to this crowded, noisy home, that Jesus is born.

Jesus didn't wait for the ideal time, for the ideal place, for a time with no taxes and no emperor and no conflict and a perfectly curated room. Jesus just needed to be brought in, to be welcomed, to be held and kept safe by community.

And it is the same today, this Christmas night. Jesus is born again, right here and now. Jesus is born here in this St Martin's community where we welcome each other, where we learn and grow together, where we care for each other, where we walk together in difficult times. Jesus is born again, into this community of love, here tonight.

Jesus is born again, inside each of us, in our own hearts longing for healing, in our hearts longing for God's presence. Jesus doesn't need us to be perfect in body, mind or spirit, Jesus doesn't need us to have expert biblical knowledge or even be certain of what we believe, Jesus just needs us to invite him in, to whatever guest room we can offer.

Jesus is born again, tonight, born into this world. Just like that world of Augustus and Quirinius, our world desperately needs a savior. So let us rejoice, St Martin's. Jesus is born. Jesus is born, here, now, tonight! Merry Christmas! Amen.