

## **“The Empty Stable”**

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**The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord – 24 December 2020**

I have an image in my head, of an empty nativity scene. A vacant stable, closed in on three sides by knotted wood and straw and hints of animals nearby. The figures that belong there, the blue robed Mary and the staff-leaning Joseph and the tiny swaddled infant Jesus nestled snugly in the manger, aren’t yet in place. All there is, is this empty space. The stable is empty, waiting. Before it lived in our imaginations as the birthplace of salvation, this was just a holding place, a waystation for animals as they passed through the phases of life. The stable was just a stable, a shelter from predators and the cold; the manger was just a manger, a feeding trough full of hay. But because of a simple reality of life, because the inn had no room to spare and the young woman needed a sheltered place to labor, this ordinary empty place has become entirely extraordinary, full of people and promise and meaning. This empty space, the only empty space available, is filled by God’s own incarnate presence. The body of God entered the world, in the only place open to welcome him.

We are accustomed to the season of Christmas being full, full of dinner parties and shopping and baking and decorating and running from church service to carol concert to pageant to year-end vacation. For so many, even now, this season is harried and brings longer shifts, shorter fuses, and endless work to feed the holiday craze. By the time the New Year begins, most of us have disassembled the festive displays of lights and trees and the stores have moved right along to selling candy hearts and teddy bears. We make our resolutions and dive headfirst into the next thing. The truth is, we usually have much more in common with the full inn than with the empty stable.

But as I preach this sermon into an empty building, my own voice echoes back to me from vacant pews. While many of you enter into this worship with me, your guest rooms remain empty and your calendars are

sparse. The space under your trees is a little less full, as so many gifts must be delivered by mail instead of in the arms of loved ones on doorsteps. Grandchildren have been born, young people have graduated from school, friends have gotten married and we must rely on cameras and computer screens to join in the celebrations. For some of us, this year has brought with it losses and funerals and estrangements, the missing Christmas cards and the empty chairs at our dinner tables. There is a deep emptiness that has haunted so many of us this year, and with it a realization of just how much our lives depend on one another's presence, one another's labor, one another's willingness to simply share a common space. The emptiness we have felt so acutely this year, the vacant space that we try to cover over with work and education and accomplishment and consumption, has always been there. This year our emptiness is simply laid bare.

The truth is, the emptiness we hide, the vacant space in our hearts that we run from, is a necessary part of who we are. It is a space that cannot be filled up with our idols and our ideals, as hard as we try to make it so. It is this emptiness that brings us back to one another, that causes us to yearn for opportunities to connect, to worship, to know God more deeply and to serve one another more fully. When we believe ourselves to be full, like the inn at Bethlehem on that fateful night, we risk turning away the only one who can truly fill our lives with meaning. The vacant stable is the birthplace of our salvation. The emptiness we face this year is the darkness in which we see a great light.

The empty stable became a nursery in an instant, not because of anything beautiful or special about it but because it met a basic human need. Mary and Joseph were far from home, far from family and friends, at a stressful and significant time. They tried for their first choice, but because of a crowd they had to turn from good to good enough. The Holy Family made a home where they were, where there was no home to be found, only emptiness to be filled. And in this ordinary act of extraordinary faith, a humble carpenter and a faithful young woman became the first to meet God face to face this side of the veil. We have more in common with them now than maybe ever before in our lifetime. We stubbornly continue to show up in the good enough, and make a home even as we must remain apart from one another.

There is a dangerous sentiment that is easy to fall into and difficult to escape, that we must suffer so that we can understand our need for God's grace. I have heard it said again and again that perhaps we are being taught a lesson, perhaps we brought this season of suffering upon ourselves by angering our God and we are receiving a judgment. I have heard it said that we must be forced to rock bottom before we can heal, that trauma and pain make us better, more interesting people. No. That is not the Gospel. We are not being forced to empty ourselves by God so that we might depend on him more humbly. No. We are merely facing the reality that we were already empty. We were already in need of the kind of fullness that comes from the God who has loved us into being. There was space in the heart of Mary to receive the gift of God's Son. There was space in the life of Joseph to protect a young prophet and her world-altering pregnancy. There was space in the stable to welcome saving grace. There was space in the darkness to usher in a new dawn, heralded by angels and rejoiced by shepherds and their flocks. Tonight, there is space in us to wonder at the miracle of a life lived for the sole purpose of loving us, a life poured out for our redemption. Tonight we receive once again the reality that, even in our darkest nights, the light of Christ stubbornly shines in the eyes of a newborn, the firstborn to a family of no particular importance. The scandalous existence of the King of Glory is born unto us in the City of David, not in a palace or a fortress but in the vacant places of our fragile hearts. In the emptiness of our separation, the angels disrupt our quiet night with good news of great joy.

The stable is no longer empty. Neither are we. The weary world rejoices.