

## **Make Room For God!** (Genesis 18:1-15; Revelation 3:20; 22:16-17; Matthew 3:1-3)

It was just a few days before Christmas, when two men decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. But while the men were sailing, a storm came up--a mighty storm that tossed the boat back and forth across the water. Finally, the tiny sailboat was forced upon the shore of a small island. The men jumped out of the boat, trying to push it back into the water. But then they realized that they were being fired upon by the island's hostile natives. As the two men dodged poisonous darts, standing waist deep in freezing water in the middle of a storm, one said to the other, "I realize that today hasn't exactly gone as planned...but this sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn't it?!"

With Christmas shopping, many of us are twice cursed. First, we're cursed if, like the two men, we don't enjoy Christmas shopping--finding a parking space, fighting the crowds, figuring out what to buy, waiting in long lines, and spending money we know that we really shouldn't be spending. A wise man has said, "Anyone who thinks Christmas doesn't last all year just doesn't have a MasterCard."<sup>1</sup> But, secondly, as a result of Christmas shopping, we're cursed in having to make room for all the new stuff we get. How will we get the new stuff to fit on the counter or table or nightstand with all the old stuff? Where will we store the old crock pot? How will we get the new toys for the kids to fit in the toy box? How will we get the new clothes to fit in the closet and in the drawers? How will we make room for another robe?

As frustrating as making room for all these material gifts might prove to be, today we're called upon to think about how we're going to make room for the gift we receive from God. For God's gift to us is by far the most important gift we will receive this season--or any season. God's gift is the gift of himself, and since his presence can and will make all the difference in our lives, God wants us to be sure that we make room for him.

Thus, throughout the scriptures, God has stressed the importance of making room for him in our hearts and in our lives. That's what God was getting at in that story of Abraham and Sarah in our Old Testament lesson for today. The Lord seemingly unexpectedly dropped in on Abraham and Sarah. It was the hottest part of the day, the time when they no doubt would have liked to

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<sup>1</sup>Kirk Kirkpatrick

have been taking it easy—certainly not cooking over a hot fire. Remember, there was no air conditioning or electric stove and oven in those days. Abraham could have said, "Oh, let's close the tent flap and pretend that we're not home." But, no, Abraham rushed to welcome the Lord, saying, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourself under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourself, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." Then Abraham told Sarah to start cooking, while he went and picked out a calf from the herd and set a servant to cooking it. Abraham and Sarah fed the Lord under a shade tree. And as a result of lovingly welcoming God, making room for God in their hearts and in their lives, Abraham and Sarah were blessed by God. The Lord told the elderly couple, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?...I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18:1-15).

Similar stories are told of those who even made room for God's representatives. For example, there's the story of the widow of Zarephath. She wasn't even a Hebrew, one of the chosen people. But during a famine, God sent his prophet Elijah to this widow. She barely had enough food to feed one last meal to her son and herself before dying. Nonetheless, she lovingly welcomed God's prophet and gave him what she had. And what a blessing this widow received because she made room for God's prophet! The jar of meal did not empty, nor did her jug of oil fail until the drought and famine ended. And even this wasn't the end of the Lord's blessing for her. For later on, when her son died, God resurrected her son!

Nonetheless, in Old Testament times, many refused to make room for God in their hearts and in their lives. And so God decided to come in a different fashion. He decided to come in human form to see if more people would lovingly welcome him, so that he could bless them with his presence. The Prophet Isaiah told people that God was coming and that they should prepare to make room for him. Isaiah said, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken'" (Isaiah 40:3-5).

In God's time, God came--in the form of a baby born to a virgin named Mary. The Gospel Writer Luke recorded, "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 for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). What? Even though Isaiah had told everyone to make room for God?

But yes, when Jesus was born, there was no room for him in the inn. One child interpreted this by saying, "And there was no room for them at the inn because Joseph forgot to make reservations!" And there was a cartoon in *The Miami News* sometime ago showing a motel manager informing the couple from Nazareth: "I'm sorry, but without any cash, credit cards or credit references the computer has rejected you!" But, we should pay serious attention to the phrase "because there was no place for them in the inn." I believe that this is more than a historical statement. I believe it's a theological statement. I believe it's a commentary about our priorities--the choices we make in our lives--choices that unfortunately do not always include God.

When Jesus grew up and was ready to be lovingly welcomed into the lives of the people he came for, John the Baptist began repeating the message of Isaiah--prepare the way for the Lord--make room for God--he's coming, and he wants to come into your heart and into your life!

Listen to how the Gospel Writer John described the coming of Jesus into our world. John wrote, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:9-14).

Those who received him, those who welcomed him, were indeed blessed. Think of the disciples, of Zacchaeus, of Mary Magdalene. But, as John said, others didn't make room for him, refused to know him intimately. The rich young ruler knew that he would have to get rid of a lot of his expensive stuff and his money to make room for God, and he just couldn't bring himself to do this. The scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, and high priests knew that

they'd have to get rid of a lot of their traditions and power to make room for God, and they refused to do this.

There's a wonderful summary of the entire theme of God wanting to be welcomed into our lives at the end of the Bible. In Revelation, Jesus is pictured as saying, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me..." (Revelation 3:20). The artist William Holman Hunt was inspired by this verse in his famous painting "The Light of the World." In the painting, Jesus is holding a lamp, symbolizing the light or revelation he carries with him. He's getting ready to knock on an overgrown and obviously long unopened door. Presumably it's the door to your and my heart. There is no outside handle on the door to our heart. God in other words can't just barge in. The door has to be opened on the inside—by us. God can only come into our hearts and our lives if we open up and lovingly welcome him in. The overgrown weeds around the door make a statement about how long it has been since we made room for God to enter our hearts and our lives.

God in Jesus has come. He wants to bring his light, his blessings, into our hearts and into our lives. But it all depends on our receptivity, doesn't it? Are we willing to open up and make room for him? One of the saddest verses of the Bible is from the Gospel According to John: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11).

Our lives get so cluttered that there's little room for God. Even when we're involved in religious activities, often we don't have time to welcome God. Just think about this season. We're so busy with Christmas cards, shopping, baking, decorating. It's difficult to make room for God in the busy inn of our lives, isn't it?

I'm not sharing this to add to our guilt. But this theological issue is at the heart of this season and every season. We need to look at all the busy-ness in our lives and see if some of it is keeping us from welcoming God into our hearts and lives. And remember, we welcome God into our lives through time spent with him in prayer, in listening to him speak to us in scripture, visiting him regularly at his house--at church. We also welcome him into our lives when we make him a part of our homes and our families. Furthermore, we welcome him into our lives when we lovingly welcome other human beings.

Remember how Jesus said that someday the righteous will ask, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And remember how Jesus said that God will answer, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

In a rural village, there was a run-down shoe repair shop operated by a strange man. He lived in the back of the shop. His fingernails and the creases in his hands and face were always dirty. The man was dirty—and he smelled. He rarely talked to anyone. He usually grunted out replies to his customers. Sometimes he even crawled on the floor. These were the times when he didn't wear the wooden legs he had to hobble on. No one knew how the man had lost his legs. No one knew anything about the man. But then, one day, a stranger moved into town, a man with a quiet, hospitable spirit. And this man invited the shoe repairman into his life. He invited the dirty, smelly shoemaker, along with a few others, to his apartment for Thanksgiving dinner. The little group shared good food, talked, and played games. The shoemaker could hardly comprehend a place where there was so much goodness and simple joy. He began to relax. He even shared his story. An orphan, he had been taken in by a farm family in Canada. The family really only wanted someone to work their farm. The orphan worked hard for the family, more than earning his keep. One bitter cold winter day, though, after he had done his chores, his feet wet and body numb with cold, he returned to the house, only to find the door barred. He had displeased the family in some way, and they punished him by locking him out in the cold! He pounded and pleaded, but they cruelly left him outside in the thirty-below-zero temperature! His feet froze, and when he didn't get proper medical care in time, he lost his legs. In all his life, he had never known love--until the newcomer showed him what love was. A miracle took place because one man made room in his life for a hurting, needy, lonely person.<sup>2</sup>

One more story--to make the point. Oh, and it's a story that shows that God has a sense of humor. The disheveled man at the rear of the church after Christmas Eve worship was simply "one homeless person too many" for an inner-city clergyman. He was resentful of not having any time for himself.

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<sup>2</sup>Hunt, Gladys, "The Joy of Being Hospitable"

Nonetheless, he did what he knew he had to do. He told the poor homeless man that he would drive him to the shelter. On the way to the shelter, the clergyman sat, steaming, in silence. He was angry at the man and at God for intruding so many times on his personal Christmas. Finally, he turned to the stranger and asked his name. The man replied, "Hay-zoos," which, of course, translates "Jesus." The ironic humor of the whole situation suddenly washed over the minister. Here he was complaining to God about taking a man named Jesus to a shelter on Christmas Eve!<sup>3</sup>

We were created to be a dwelling place for God. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not know that you are God's temple...?" Our scriptures on this Fourth Sunday of Advent call us to make room for God in our hearts and in our lives. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. May our response be that suggested in Revelation: 'Come' (Revelation 22:16-17). Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 21, 2008

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, Robert C., "Leave It to God to Beat Us at Our Own Game," *Salt of The Earth*, January/February 1995, p. 32.