Holiday Home Tour
⭐ Christmas in All Four Gospels ⭐

Service of the Longest Night
Making a Place
Luke 2:1-7
Rev. Jenny McDevitt
December 21, 2022

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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 other place for them.

My friend Taylor loves to read. When Taylor was a child, the only way to pull her out of her books was to actually, physically put something between her eyes and the page in front of her. So when Taylor's first child came along, she couldn't wait to read with him. But when it came time for that child to read on his own, he struggled. He still does. It's not fair; it's not for lack of trying; it's just the way it is. When he read his first chapter book, all by himself, he was so proud. He wanted to show off his accomplishment, so they called me on FaceTime so I could see it in action. Taylor warned me in advance: "He wants to impress you. He's been practicing for days."

He got off to a wonderful start. It was slow going, and it was choppy, and his fingers were leading him from one syllable to the next. He was concentrating fiercely, and he was doing it. He was reading me the story. But then he sneezed. And I know — it doesn't sound like much. But when he sneezed, the book fell from his hands, and as soon as he realized this, his eyes filled up with tears. He tried to pull himself together. He picked up the book, but his concentration was gone. I could see the words getting jumbled up in his eyes. He turned the pages back and forth, but it didn't help. The tears fell. "I've lost my place," he cried. "I'm so sorry. I tried so hard. But I've lost my place." He was inconsolable.

It is hard — it is heartbreaking — to lose your place.

"There must be something you can do," she said. "We've come so far. All the way from Nazareth — for the census — we had no choice. We had to come. And you can see that I'm traveling for two. There must be something you can do," she said. "There must be a place we can stay." But apparently, there was not.

Have you ever lost your place?

"I still can't believe it," he said. He sat in my office. I could barely hear his voice. "We only had three years together. How is that possible? We had only started living. She was only 34. I wake up alone every day now," he said, "but I still can't believe it. It's like the whole world was pulled out from under me."

Have you ever lost your place? Your reason for being? Your compass in the dark? Your dreams for the future? It is heartbreaking to lose your place.

"I have so much more time now," she said. "I've been to my kids' basketball games. Next week I'll go to an office party. It's been years since I could do that. There are Christmas gifts wrapped and under the tree

already. It's amazing." "Then why all the tears?" I asked. She laughed for a moment, even as she cried. "I took care of my mother for seven years," she said. "For seven years, all day, every day, I was a caregiver. And now … now I don't know what I am anymore. I don't know who I am anymore."

Have you ever lost your place? Your whole sense of self? Your understanding of how the world is ordered? Your one constant in the midst of change? It is heartbreaking to lose your place.

"I don't know what to think anymore," she said. "And it makes me so angry, and it makes me feel hopeless. For all of my life, I believed in the inherent goodness of people. I believed that everything right would be stronger than everything wrong, that justice really would prevail, and that maybe if we all worked hard enough, I would see it — I would see some of it — in my lifetime. I'm no longer sure I believe that," she said.

Have you ever lost your place? Your belief in the good? Your trust of your neighbor? Your sense of purpose? It is heartbreaking to lose your place.

"I just feel so guilty," he said. "No matter what, I feel guilty. When I'm sad, I feel guilty for being sad while everyone else is happy. But even worse is when I feel happy. Then I feel guilty for feeling happy, because my wife died, and if I'm happy, doesn't that mean I'm not missing her enough? I'm not okay with that," he said. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel," he said, "but everything I feel, feels wrong."

Have you ever lost your place? Your sense of what's right and what's wrong? Your confidence that you loved enough? Your confidence that you were loved enough? It is heartbreaking to lose your place.

They had come over for dinner. "How are you doing?" I asked. "It's hard to describe," they said "We're healthy, and we're thankful for that. We have each other, and we're thankful for that. We just thought we would have a baby by now, and we don't. Nothing bad has happened, but the one thing we want most in this world hasn't happened, either. What are we supposed to do with that?"

Have you ever lost your place? Your capacity for hope? Your faith in tomorrow? Your satisfaction with the present? It is heartbreaking to lose your place.

It had been made perfectly clear: there was no place for them. But note this, and note this well: that did not stop Jesus from coming. "The time came for her to deliver her child. 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 anywhere else."

There are so few details given here. The Bible is inconsistent in that regard. Genesis spends several verses making sure we know all the architectural details of Noah's ark — the type of wood, and the dimensions, and how all the animals are to be arranged. Exodus takes it to the next level, dedicating more than two full chapters to the size and color and design of the curtains that will surround the tabernacle. Luke himself promises a detailed report. The first words of his gospel declare it: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, I, too, decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, so that you may know the truth." But here, in this moment, the orderly account is awfully vague. We know there is no place for them, no room, but how did they end up in the stable? Was a door quietly propped open? Did someone have a change of heart? Or did they invite themselves in, trespassing on the verge of giving birth? We don't actually know — scripture doesn't tell us — and over time, I have become grateful for that. In this moment, those details do not matter. In this moment, those circumstances do not matter. Because God is coming into this world. That is all that matters. God is going to show up when God is going to show up, and if there is no place, then God will make a place. Because that's what love does: love always makes a place.

He was born in stable, because there was no place else to go, because love always makes a place. He touched the lepers and healed the demon-possessed. He hosted a banquet and invited the poor right off the streets, because love always makes a place. He invited extra workers into the vineyard, and found a way to compensate them, because love always makes a place. He sat himself down to dinner with a tax collector,

because the man was lonely and without community, and because love always makes a place. He welcomed back the prodigal son, because love always makes a place, and then he welcomed the grumpy brother to the celebratory feast, because love always makes a place. He looked at two criminals hanging on a cross right alongside him, and he said, "Today you will be with me in paradise," because even in our worst moments, even in our rock bottom moments, love always makes a place. And in his last conversation with his friends, he gathered them around and he said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house there are many rooms, and I am going to prepare a place for you," because — you're starting to see now, right? — love always makes a place. That is what love does.

Now, grief … grief is a different story. Grief has terrible manners. Guilt is a messy houseguest. Regret has too much dirty laundry, fear interrupts every conversation, and loneliness overstays its welcome. But even if these are your companions this season, perhaps especially if these are your companions this season, Jesus opens wide the door, because no matter what, no matter how you come, no matter what has happened, love always makes a place.

It starts at Christmas, when there was no room for the savior of the world, but the savior of the world came anyway. And what I think this means, is that Jesus is always being born right where we need him most. What this means, is that we are being saved precisely when it feels like we have lost our place. What this means, in the simplest terms possible, is that despite all evidence to the contrary, I promise you, no matter what burden you are carrying, there will come a day when everything really will be okay again.

It starts at Christmas, when the only thing Jesus can ask of us is to come close and adore him. That's almost all a baby can do — look at you as if to say, "Aren't I magnificent? Come close and look at me. Come close and look at my face full of love."

So come all ye faithful, and all ye who are frightened. O come all ye who are hurting, and all ye who are healing. Come and behold him, born the king of angels. Come and speak to him or be silent beside him. Come with your empty hands and your broken hearts. Come when the world does't know what to do with you, or when you don't know what to do with the world. Come to him. Come and adore that little child, born in a manger, because he is a making a place for you, even now.