

A Guest Room at Christmas Time – by Justin

Many of us do not handle rejection very well. I know I never have. The thing about rejection is it doesn't seem to get any easier the more it happens. This reality is never clearer to me than when I read letters from inmates: "My mom won't write me." "My kids never come to see me." "I hear from my spouse less and less." "None of my friends put money on my books." On it goes. Rejection and loneliness are never easy, but in the penitentiary these feelings intensify at Christmas time. Tradition says this is the time of year to be with family and friends. But the penitentiary says a sentence has been passed and it must be served before anyone can go home. The harsh difference between where the inmate wants to be at Christmas, and where he actually is, raises an important question: What value, if any, does the story of Jesus' birth hold for those doing time behind razor wire on Christmas Day?

You are likely familiar with the image of Mary and Joseph being turned away by the innkeeper because he doesn't have any spare rooms. They are all checked out for the night, resulting in Jesus being born in a barn somewhere in Bethlehem. Historians now tell us this is not the correct way to read the story. The word used by Luke does not mean "inn" or "hotel," and there were no such businesses in ancient Bethlehem anyway. So, what was the place like where Jesus was born? Houses in ancient Bethlehem had three rooms and were shaped like a rectangle. There was a large room in the center of the house which was the main living area. On one side there was a guest room separated from the rest of the house by a wall. On the other side of the house was the animal stable (ancient Jews did not have barns; they kept their animals in their home). The animal stable was divided from the rest of the house only by a partial wall. Jesus' family wasn't turned away from an inn. They were turned away from the guest rooms in people's houses. They were turned away by family and friends. Apparently no one offered to give up their space in one of Bethlehem's guest rooms so that Mary, who was nine-months pregnant, could have privacy and comfort. That's why she had to lay baby Jesus in an animal's feeding trough. Jesus was born in a stable on the opposite side of the house from where the real guests were sleeping. Jesus, then, has his first rejection experience before he is even born. The king of the universe comes into the world surrounded by the sights and smells of animals in a room that is not designed to provide privacy or comfort.



But that is not the end of the story. It is certainly not an accident that the same rare word for "guest room" does not show up anywhere else in the Gospels until the end of Jesus' life. Right before he is betrayed he has a *guest room* prepared where he will provide His friends with a meal, wash their feet, and leave them with final words of encouragement. The one who was rejected at Christmas is now the inviter. The one who was left out of the guest room now has a room prepared so that his disciples can come in and be with him. He will not reject others the way He has been rejected. You see, there is a direct connection between the Christmas story and the night before Jesus' death. Through dinner, friendship, and helping one another we fight back against the loneliness and rejection of the Christmas story, of Jesus' story, of your story, of my story, of lots of people's stories. There is nothing Jesus could do to change the facts of his rejection that first Christmas. But he did have a choice to not treat others the same way that he had been treated.

If you use the hospitality of Jesus you can transform the loneliness of Christmas into a time of celebration. There's a lot of potential to have a real Christmas, even in the penitentiary. The prisons actually serve a decent meal on Christmas. Many inmates make the most of it by having group prayer before the meal. Some make it their business to reach out to inmates they don't consort with on a regular basis. If you have more than someone else, you should remember that sharing is the universal language of friendship. Inmates lucky enough to hear from their families should look out for those who aren't so lucky. Make sure someone like that has a place at the table. Also remember that Jesus allowed Judas to eat with him even though he didn't agree with the path Judas was on. There are many Muslims, atheists, and other non-Christians in the penitentiary, and Christmas comes at a dark and cold time of the year for everybody. The non-believers are also worthy of your love.

The rejected has prepared a table for eating, a bowl of water for washing, and a conversation to ease our minds. He invites us in. Don't waste your time outside, dwelling on your own problems. Instead, answer His call to Christmas hospitality and you may discover that even a prison can become a guest room. Merry Christmas to all of you from all of us! May God bless you and your family!