

I

One of my favorite Christmas movies is National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. In the film, Clark Griswold is determined that he, his wife Ellen, and their two teenage children are going host all of their extended family for what he calls a big old-fashioned family Christmas. Clark has a huge heart and will not entertain any notions of sending family members to stay a hotel, so the teenagers give up their bedrooms to their elders and everyone crowds into the house together.

And just when Clark and Ellen seem like they've got a handle on things, just when the 25,000 imported Italian twinkle lights are finally lit and the decorations on the tree are just so, just as all their houseguests are settled in, more company shows up. Except these guests were unanticipated. Cousin Eddie, his wife Catherine, their children, and their large dog named Snots, show up unannounced.

Cousin Catherine sheepishly says to Ellen, "We were gonna call, but Eddie wanted it to be a surprise."

And Ellen and Clark look at each other with wide eyes, and then Ellen fakes a smile and says, "Sure. We've got plenty of room. Plenty of towels, plenty of everything."

II

Perhaps you've had a similar experience. Perhaps you've been a host or a guest when an event or a holiday draws your extended family together and you all crowd together into someone's home, and some folks crowd onto pullout couches and kids settle down onto blankets laid out on the living room floor and every available square foot of the house seems to be occupied.

III

Keep that image of a house overflowing with inlays and aunts and uncles and cousins in mind as we read these familiar words from the Gospel According to Luke, the second chapter, beginning at the first verse.

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor 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 place for them in the inn.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Because there was no place for them in the inn.

No place in the inn.

In most of our Christmas pageants and such, Joseph and Mary, weary from their travels, present themselves at the front desk of something that looks like an ancient Motel 6, and a sleepy desk clerk informs them that there is no vacancy, but offers them shelter in the barn out back.

But the word that Luke uses here that gets translated into English as inn can also be translated as guest room. And so I wonder,

what if Luke has in mind for us here is something more akin to temporary lodging put together just for the moment, rather than a freestanding hotel.

We know from the study of archeology that in the first-century world, for people of limited means, modest homes were constructed such that animals and humans all lived together under the same roof, with the animal stalls built at ground level, and the family quarter up above in something like a loft.

And so I wonder if Joseph and Mary set off to travel from Galilee down to Bethlehem to register for the census, with the intent of staying in the home of a member of Joseph's extended family. After all, Joseph, we're told, was of the house and line of David, and presumably he might have had some distant relatives who still lived there. But when they got to the house, it was already full of in-laws and aunts and uncles and cousins who had all come to town to register for the census, and there was no place for them in the guest room in the loft, and so the only space left was down below with the animals.

What if Luke is trying to tell us that the Savior of the world comes into the world not in barn somewhere out back, but right in the middle of the house, right into the middle of a family, right in the middle of everyday life, whether we're ready or not, whether there's room in the guest room or not, Jesus comes, because he is Emmanuel – God with us.

#### IV

My friend, I think you and I have been taught that faith should be mostly a private affair. I think we are taught that our faith

should be unobtrusive, kept out in the back, and sure, we can go check on it from time to time, but otherwise it's best left alone.

But I wonder. I wonder if what Christmas really means is that the coming of God into the world doesn't begin somewhere out in the back, somewhere out of sight, but right in the middle of your life?

My friend, this child whose birth we mark this night is named Emmanuel – which means God is with us. God is with you, my friend, not just on this one night of the year, not just for an hour or two on a Sunday morning a few times a month. God is with you right in the middle of it all, right in the middle of the stress and the joy, right in the middle of the frustrations and the beauty, right in the middle of it all. As the carol we'll sing a little later tonight proclaims, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let every heart prepare him room."

#### V

And as Clark W. Griswold declares boldly and loudly, we're all in this together! Emmanuel means God is with us, and this night is born in the city of David for us a Savior, who is the Messiah.

God is coming into the world not just in ones or twos scattered hither and yon. God is coming into the world in this huge extended family that we call the church – a family full of squabbles and irritations to be sure, but a family gathers to welcome the Christ-child right in the middle of this house.

Thanks be to God. Amen.