

The Innkeeper's Wife

Luke 2:1-20

Often in Christmas pageants the Innkeeper is the heavy, he the one who told Mary and Joseph: "There's no room in the inn!"

But what if he were not so much a villain, and what if his wife was a big part of it? So tonight, this holy night, a Christmas story: The Innkeeper's Wife. What if it happened something like this?

She had been by his side in the inn for years, but rarely seen a season like this. Caesar's decree for a census meant that everyone had to return to their hometown to be registered. So Bethlehem had a stream of travelers arriving to follow the imperial decree. Every inn was packed, including the one she and her husband ran.

They were weary from getting all the rooms ready for the visitors. Today was the same as the day before and the day before that. Too much work, but what could they do?

On this late afternoon the rooms were all rented when Mary and Joseph came in and asked for a place for the night. They had been on the road for four

days in their 80 mile journey south from Nazareth, Joseph leading the donkey while she, full with child, rode on the donkey's back. When they came to the door they must have looked bedraggled, and Mary was holding her belly from below as if the baby was about to come.

The innkeeper and his wife looked at them. They knew every room was taken. The innkeeper's voice almost faltered as he said the words: "I'm sorry, there's no room here." It was then that the innkeeper's wife pulled him to the side and whispered something in his ear.

The innkeeper said to them: "There is a shepherd's cave out back. It's not a proper room, but it can give you shelter for the night." The couple, almost frantic with fatigue, nodded yes.

The innkeeper's wife had been taught by her faith and her life about the sacredness of hospitality. In that time and place taking someone in could be a life and death thing. So in her heart she said, "Where there is no room, we make room."

Then she spun into action. She ran to her one hired hand and called out to her children who were old enough to help and said, "Let's get the stable ready for our guests!"

You might imagine all there was to do. The shepherd's cave was a shelter for shepherds to come and spend the night with their animals. And it was the place the innkeeper and his wife kept their one cow and chickens. Their dog wandered in and out all day long.

So down they went to the stable. They first shoveled out all the soiled straw, raked the floor smooth and added new straw. They picked up all the tools lying around the shelter and put them away.

Then they put down mats for the couple to sleep on. The innkeeper's wife converted the cow's feeding trough into a makeshift crib in case the baby came during the night.

Then they led Mary and Joseph to the shelter. It was as presentable a place as they could make it. The innkeeper's wife brought a basket of cheese and bread and a flask of water and left it there. Then she returned to the inn.

It was getting dark. The couple gave thanks for all that had been provided for them, tied the donkey to a post and began to get ready to sleep. After four days on the road with little sleep it wouldn't take them long before they were fast asleep.

In the middle of the night the innkeeper's wife heard a cry. She raced to the shelter and found Mary in the early stages of childbirth. She then ran back to her kitchen, got a large bowl of steaming water and some clean cloths.

Mary looked scared. This would be her first child, and she was far from home where her mother and other women friends would have been there to help her deliver the child. Joseph was as comfortable as a turtle on a bicycle. What was he supposed to do?

When the innkeeper's wife reappeared she was ready. She had borne children with the help of a midwife and had been a midwife herself to others. She went to Mary, bathed her face with a warm cloth, and comforted her until the birth moment arrived. When the child's head crowned, her heart raced. Then came the child. It all seemed like a dream to her.

She cut and tied the umbilical cord and handed the infant into Mary's arms.

Then it became so still, the only sounds the quiet nuzzling of the child at Mary's breast. There was no bleating of sheep, not yet. The cow stood quietly at rest, as the donkey. The dog found a place to lie down in the corner. Even the chickens were asleep for the night.

The night sky was lit up with stars as never before. The candle in its stand shed its soft light on Mary and Joseph and the child.

This night, the innkeeper's wife wondered, this stillness, this almost unearthly light, has there ever been a night like this? *She had been in the place she needed to be*, and a quiet joy filled her.

Later that night the rowdy shepherds would come running and peer in to see the child, but even they were possessed with a stillness and quiet they'd never felt before. Shh! they said to each other as they looked at Mary and her child.

Centuries later William Shakespeare would describe the night the savior was born: "So hallowed and so gracious is the time." That is what the innkeeper's wife felt that night. It was almost dawn when she returned to the inn to help her husband with the breakfast for their guests.

She hardly knew what to say.
