Christmas Eve, 2015

*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*

The best part of Christmas is the stories. Every year we tell them and retell them, in worship, in pageants, in nativity scenes. Tonight, we leave space for multiple readings and carols so we can listen and tell stories in word and song. We wonder about what happened back then to Mary, to Joseph and to Jesus. The Bible doesn’t really tell us much and so we fill in the details with our spiritual imaginations. The details of Matthew and Luke are scant at best and they may or may not be historically accurate. We don’t know how or why Mary and Joseph were without a place to stay. Was it just because the city was full for the census? Had their plans fallen through? How many places had they tried before this one? Because we don’t have many details, there is room for beautiful, faithful and artistic additions to this story as we imagine how it might have gone. Mary, heavily pregnant, riding on a donkey. (Donkey image) Having been pregnant, I honestly cannot say which sounds worse, walking or riding on a donkey. And so they went from place to place to no avail. Some artists show door after door being closed in their faces. (Innkeeper image) And finally they reach a place in which an inn keeper makes a different choice than the others. He doesn’t have a vacancy, just like the others, but he sees the situation. He kindly offers what he does have, a warm stable with soft straw. (Neon image) In that moment, was the spirit whispering to him, offering him an opportunity to serve God? How did come to make the choice to help this family that was in search of shelter?

This year at Hope, we have come to appreciate displacement and searching for a place to stay. (Road image) Last May we were told on a Tuesday that our building was not safe to occupy due to structural instability and stress on this back wall. So on a Tuesday I heard that we could not have church in the building that following Sunday or for the foreseeable future. And so, very much like the Holy Family long ago, we went knocking on doors. We made calls to our surrounding neighbor churches first. We went first to the ones who we had worked with in the past on justice campaigns in VA, especially for marriage equality. Unfortunately, all of those were already rented at any conceivable worship times. And so we started calling the other churches in our neighborhood, most of whom we had not met before. And two of those inn keepers turned us down for very specific reasons. We are open and affirming. One of the pastors turned us down apologetically and the other church made absolutely no apology. And so, we were still searching. I happened to be driving on Franconia Rd with a consultant to visit the fire station to see if it might work as a worship space and he said what about that church? Have you asked them? He pointed to a sign that said “All Saints Episcopal Church Sharon Chapel.” I said, no I’ve never noticed it before. And then immediately I felt an affinity for this church being hard to see up on the hill. Hope is also hard to find). So we drove up and we literally knocked on the door. Rev. Cayce Ramey, the rector there, opened it. We
explained our situation that we had knocked on many doors but we had been told that either there was literally no room at the inn or that there was no room at the inn for people like us. And so Rev. Ramey made a different choice. He made the innkeepers choice. He said he would go to his leadership to see what they could do. And the leadership backed him up and they found a place for us that was even better than the stable in the back. Over the four months we were there, we grew close to their members and we have shared in joint events and ministries together. Some of our members helped them prepare their grounds for a new playground. Some of their members went caroling last week with our members in a local nursing home. We are forever changed by the experience and it all started with Rev. Ramey being in the position of an inn keeper and making a different choice.

I tell you this story because my view about displacement has changed a lot this year. And I was never even physically at risk myself. My children and I have always had a roof over our heads. But our church community was on the road. We were in need of a place to stay for awhile. I have new empathy now for the courage it takes to ask for a favor. I have appreciation for the sacrifices made on both sides when someone welcomes a stranger. And I certainly know when God has placed a choice in front of someone with the power to help and they do.

At Hope, now we can understand better how God is present on the road and in the humility of searching. We can remember the faithfulness of God and the choice of the stranger to open the door.

Because we see that the Christ child is truly the champion of those on the road. Of those searching for a place to stay. And indeed, he is the champion of those who in that moment of choice, take a risk to welcome the stranger in need.

Thomas Merton, the poet and Trappist monk, about the first Christmas: "Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited." Jesus is always present with those, as Merton says, "for whom there is no room."

In our world these days, we have seen and heard many voices that would like to close doors, add locks and even build walls to keep out those who are searching. Those who are seeking a place to come in from the cold, refugees fleeing violence, people seeking safety for their children.

At Hope UCC, we are back home. We celebrated for weeks all the people who worked to bring us back and how great it feels to be back here safe and sound. But now that we are back, we are behind the door. We have shifted into the role of the inn keeper. What will we do here when God gives us our own choices? Will we answer? How will we respond to something as large as the refugee crisis and to something as small as a new visitor in our midst on a Sunday morning? Will we live out our vision of "Welcome, Nurture, Share?"
Just like in church, in our own lives too we go back and forth in different situations between being the ones wandering in need of help and being the inn keeper with the power and the choice to extend grace or not. It is important that we empathize and remember both. We remember how it felt for us to be displaced and we tell the stories of how Mary and Joseph went knocking on doors with their donkey. We remember and we tell stories. We use our imaginations and take ourselves back in time, so we can dream of how God might be calling us today. So as part of the magic of this night and the joy of this story, may we be challenged. (Inn keeper photo) May we tell the stories of the inn keeper who opened the door and made a choice to help. May we tell stories of a God who made the ultimate choice to be born as a baby in a vulnerable family 2000 years ago. May we never forget the power of those choices. May we be overcome with the love and grace of God in those choices, so that we might make our own.

As author Jay Parini writes, “It’s the hard reality that Jesus taught us, over 2,000 years ago. And every year at Christmas, he comes to us as a child on the run with his impoverished and terrified parents. He knocks at the door of our house and our hearts. And we let him in -- or we turn him away.” What will be our choice this year?

Quotes taken from:  