

Hospitality at the stable (Luke 2:1-14)

What if we imagined the innkeeper as good?

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I often wonder about the innkeeper, that most maligned character of the Christmas story. He doesn't actually show up in the text; his existence is implied only by the inn at which there is no room for Mary and Joseph. We never actually meet him, but we love to imagine him.

He's a regular in Christmas pageants, often an inhospitable bad guy who slams the door in the face of the Holy Family, leaving them to fend for themselves in the cold night. In what is probably a safe assumption, we imagine him as a "he," so much so that we sometimes—especially when there are extra children who need to be cast in the pageant—also imagine an innkeeper's wife. In the Las Posadas tradition, Mary and Joseph encounter multiple stingy innkeepers before they find one who will let them in.

In our imaginations, it seems the innkeeper is almost always grumpy, overworked, tired, and mean. Why else would he doom the Christ Child to be born on a bed of hay with (also imagined) farm animals breathing down on him? We are indignant on behalf of the new mother. We gasp at the thought of Mary giving birth in less than ideal conditions, as if we are shocked (shocked!) to discover that the world is not set up to care well for poor, pregnant women.

I wonder if maybe we haven't gotten it all wrong. Perhaps we have tried too hard to find a villain in this story. We've wished for a simple answer to why things are hard, why there is still suffering, why the Son of God wasn't born in a luxury suite. It's easy to blame the innkeeper.

But what if he was doing the best he could? What if it was an act of hospitality, of generosity, to walk Mary and Joseph around to the back, to the corner of the stable, where they'd be out of the wind and away from the crowds? Maybe—since we're imagining details here—the innkeeper called the local midwife, who came and coached Mary through the last, breathless labor pains. Maybe he brought some soup from the kitchen and a loaf of bread and then stood waiting with a nervous Joseph, a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Maybe the innkeeper's wife showed Mary how to bring the baby to her breast and how to use those bands of cloth to swaddle him. Maybe she sang Jesus his first lullaby.

Maybe, together, they ushered in generosity and grace in a world where both are in short supply. What if we assumed the best in each other instead of the worst?

In so many ways, the world is no more hospitable to the most vulnerable among us now than it was then. The poor are still shoved aside. Childbirth is still dangerous. The wandering are still told they can't come in. Perhaps we should follow the lead of this innkeeper, who made space for this family in a world that had no room for them. Perhaps we need more innkeepers who will widen the welcome for those the world has cast out. Perhaps, after all, it's the innkeeper who makes room for God's love to come into the world.