

My name is Benjamin Malon – most people just call me Ben. And for those of you who are fluent in Aramaic, you already have a clue as to why I was invited to be here today. For my last name, Malon, means “a place of lodging for the night.” I was an innkeeper in Bethlehem.

And much like the Apostle Thomas continues to be known for just one choice he made – doubting the resurrection of Jesus – I am remembered for one choice I made.

Now many people think I am some kind of cruel, heartless landlord: after all, I'm not part of any Nativity set. I haven't heard any carols about me or seen my likeness on any Christmas cards. And there doesn't even seem to be any painting which includes me either!

So I am here to set the record straight, once and for all. First off—it wasn't me that wanted the whole world counted in a census – lay that at the feet of Caesar Augustus. He was the one that set all those people on the road. Oh, it was going to be a boon for the economy – all those people needing to find food and shelter on the road. But Bethlehem?? We're just a bump in the road. We're less than a day's journey from the big city of Jerusalem – that's where all the 5 star hotels were to be found. NOT in Bethlehem. And remember, each family was to go to the place where their ancestors were from. Both Mary and her husband, Joseph, was from King David's branch of the Jewish tree – and thus they came to Bethlehem. . .

Did they not have any relatives that could take them in? An aunt, an uncle, a cousin 5 times removed – that had an extra room, or an extra bed, or someplace they could have stayed? Nobody bothers asking these questions. . . I guess they had no one – and that's why they came knocking at my door, like so many others.

I must have gotten in and out of bed 10 times that night! Stubbing my toes as I stumbled over sleeping bodies to get to the door. “No more room,” I would say. “Sorry folks – no more room. Come back in the morning – we have a couple of families leaving then.”

Those knocking in their search for shelter -- would all mutter something under their breath – and then head back out into the night. Most probably ended up sleeping on the ground along the road, or snuggled up against a building somewhere – much like drunken shepherds on a Saturday night after the sheep had been shorn. *Because every place in Bethlehem had been booked – months in advance!*

But when Joseph knocked that night – it was different. He was a burly man with big arms and strong hands. And he was quick to explain how he and his wife had travelled more than 100 miles from Nazareth over rough and rocky terrain. And his wife – was pregnant – one look at her, and even I knew it was not going to be long before the census count would go up by one ----And so Joseph, just would not take NO for an answer. . . .

“Is there any place, anywhere?” he pleaded. . . I pulled the door closed just a bit, and hastily consulted with my wife: “Is there any place, anywhere?” I asked. “She's pregnant!”

My wife, Sarah, said, “there are already 3 people in every bed, and people sleeping on all the couches – and you know, yourself, the floors are all taken up with bodies making it an obstacle course just to get to the door.” We whispered back and forth, racking our brains, trying to come up with some kind of solution. When suddenly, I thought of the stable --- at the back of the Inn. It's not much, but it is protected from the wind. And the body heat from the animals makes it a warm place – no matter how cold it gets outside, like it was on this particular starry night.

I flung open the door, and welcomed the couple with a broad smile. I explain I don't have much – but there is the possibility of the stable. Will it do?

Joseph said it will – and it did, as they offered their thanks for a place to stay. So instead of the child being born on the roadside – he is at least born out of the elements.

For that, you would think I would be remembered for saving the day, or saving the night, as it was – and deserved at least a line or two in a Christmas song! But instead, I am remembered for having no room in my inn! Gees, the thanks you get – or don't get, as it was.

Anyway, the couple were settled – and so back to bed I crept. And about the time I was drifting back to sleep under the warm covers –I heard a commotion – out back, by the stable. . . So I got up, yet again, stumbled out to the stable and was ready to run off a bunch of raggedy, smelly old shepherds who had showed up – who I thought were also looking for a place to stay.

Just as I was about to raise my voice – Joseph motioned me over with his hand to whisper: “It's okay – they've come to see the newborn Christ.”

It was only then that I noticed the child had already been born – need I remind you – in a warm place – not out on the road, thank you very much: and then what Joseph said – hit me: The new born Christ? As in the long-awaited Messiah? Who were these people???

Noticing that the shepherds, and it seemed – even the animals were kneeling in adoration – I knelt too. And watched. And prayed. And listened to one old shepherd whose face was lined by years of sweat and sin – recount a story of angels and heavenly glory, and a sign of a holy baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, to be found in a stable in Bethlehem of all places.

And I proudly thought: it's my stable where this baby was born. My manger in which he rested. My straw, my animals. . .The shepherds left after a while. Most of them leaned over and kissed the sleeping Christ-child before they departed.

It was then I started to figure out just how important this family was. . . and vowed that even though I did not have room for this child to be born in my inn ---- I would always make room for him in my heart. **And that's what you need to do:**

No matter what – always make room for him in your heart. Other things will try to crowd him out – but give him a place to come and dwell in your heart and give him a role in guiding your life --- **and your life will never be the same!**

Just like my life – was never the same.

So I'm Ben Mallon, and innkeeper in Bethlehem. And as you now know – I'm not some mean, heartless, person. I was there. I saw him. I *did* make room for him. Which is what we all need to do.

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