

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
December 24, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce**

Reading: Luke 2:1-14

Sermon: Let every heart prepare him room

Welcome to Rideau Park. Or welcome back, or welcome again – because there's a pretty good chance you might have been here yesterday or sometime this week?

Rideau Park is a busy place. I like to say our motto is "We got it going on!" Because we do. Whether it is in our own programs, or whether we are hosting community groups or fundraisers for good causes, sometimes it feels like the entrance to every room is a revolving door, where one group has just left and immediately the next group is in there, unpacking their stuff, and rearranging the furniture to suit their needs. We go from three course meals to silent meditation to cubs and scouts playing games all in a 12 hour period. I swear I sat down on one of the couches for a meeting last week, and it was still warm from whoever occupied it the meeting before that.

Sometimes it might even feel like there is no room left. No room for the newcomer or the more isolated, or the latecomer or the outsider.

In that way we are like Bethlehem, that busy, bustling, little city, all of a sudden overflowing with reunited brethren, full to capacity. So full there was no room at the inn, or any inn, for a woman in labour and a very stressed out husband. Mary and Joseph, delayed on the road by Mary's very pregnant state, perhaps, arriving too late to get a room. Or too on the margins, not well-connected enough to call in a favour.

As the story goes, however, someone did make room for Joseph and Mary, and eventually the Christ child. Whoever they were, they didn't have a lot of time, they didn't have much in the way of resources, or space or hospitality, but somehow, for some reason, they made it work. And so we sing those famous words:

Let every heart prepare him room...

Because it isn't always easy to make room for him, or for any unexpected guest, but it is the way of love, the way that God would have us love one another.

When I was new to motherhood, with a little daughter (Ruth) whom I adored, I found that I was pregnant with my second child, and much sooner than I expected. In one of those very likely hormone induced, not exactly rational mind games you play with yourself, I started to feel guilty. I felt so badly for this prospective new little one.

In my heart of hearts, I was worried that I could never love that second one quite as much as I loved the first. No matter how many times I tried to prepare a room for that new baby in my heart, every time I tried to visualize caring for this impending infant, I always felt swamped with memories of Ruth as a baby and the wonder of being a parent which I felt for the first time.

I guess I had never experienced love quite like the love I felt as a mother for her child. So I could not imagine that powerful experience of love being duplicated, that there could ever be room in my heart for another baby.

Of course, when she was born, the problem resolved itself the instant the nurse placed the new baby in my arms.

Rebekah had arrived, her own unique little being, and I discovered that she had her own unique room in my heart. It was like that image in the Grinch cartoon, where his x-rayed heart grows so big it breaks the screen. My love expanded, and I gained a newer deeper understanding of how it is that love multiplies.

Every time we encounter and learn to love someone in a new kind of relationship, in a way that stretches our boundaries and imagination, then our understanding of **the infinity** of God's love grows a little more profound.

For God has given us the capacity to love **many** people, in many different ways. It can be tempting to categorize love in the same way that we try to manage our limited resources like time and finances. We create a pyramid of who we love the most, and we let our love trickle down to the big part at the bottom, to those unnamed people we love abstractly or "in theory".

We might even be tempted to think there is no way you could love someone unrelated, and yet we know the concept of family is being re-shaped and re-formed in different ways by different people – re=shaped around issues of identity or safety or economics or distance or respect. We have even seen people risk their own security, status, even their life, to save the life of someone they barely know. That is love in action. It exceeds our expectations that love has limits.

Christmas is the celebration of God's love. It tells the story of how God's love burst apart the limits of our human categories and priorities: For God so loved the whole world, the evangelist says, that God gave the only-begotten one. To join us at the table, and make us brothers and sisters in a whole new way.

God gave the Christ child to become incarnate in our lives, no matter the chaos and the trouble, the despair and faith-less-ness we have demonstrated before his birth, or afterwards. God gave God's own self to the world, as a baby, to give the world hope, peace, joy and love.

For God so loved the world...

Advent is supposed to be the season, we say, of Preparation. Christmas is **supposed** to be the season of celebration. And yet, I think we forget what or whom we are preparing for.

These days preparation for Christmas has become a long checklist of activities and expenses:

- Have you finished your shopping?
- Do you have something for everyone?

- Do you have something to wear to the office holiday party?
- Is the baking done, the eggnog chilled, the pudding plummed?
- Did you find the perfect Christmas cards, the ornaments, the Michael Buble CD?

Excactly who do we think we are we preparing for?

We are preparing room in our hearts for **Jesus**. A babe born to an anonymous couple. He didn't even have a cradle to sleep in. He was a displaced person, and his parents were at risk because they had slipped past the authorities. What use would he have for our tinsel and egg nog?

Who are we really preparing our hearts to receive? And how will we show him our love?

We sing those famous words: "Let every heart prepare him room..."

Not to make you feel guilty for forgetting him. But to say thank-you for what God has already done. God has burst down the walls of our categories, and showed us what an infinity of love might mean. A room in your heart, a safe place to rest, a place at the table. Thanks be to God, Immanuel, God with us. Let every heart prepare him room. Amen