

This past week I had a sad five-year-old on my hands. It was his fifth birthday, but due to COVID he was unable to have a kid party. He made the most of it and he was a good sport. He got cards from so many of you! Also, we got him a pinata. Then something wonderful happened.

My parents and my in-laws come to our house for Thanksgiving and we celebrated Dean’s birthday again all together. His little eyes lit up as he realized how special and how loved he is. This is what community is about. A place for us to experience life and the love of God. God created us to be in community and wait with hope for the coming of Christ.

Today we kick off the first Sunday of Advent with our new sermon series called “Making Room” based off the book written by Ed Robb. This year we need Advent. We need Christ to come into our lives once again and offer us hope. We need the light of Christ to come and brighten up our lives. We need to be reminded that we are better together, and we are called to continue to make room for Christ and our neighbors.

Ed Robb’s book: “Making Room” begins with an interesting story focusing on an unlikely character in the Christmas nativity, the innkeeper. In fact, he points out that we have created the inn keeper and no where in scripture is the inn keeper named. Scripture reads there was “no room at the inn” (Luke 2:7).

Robb points out that we have casted the inn keeper as a scrooge, as a character in a nativity play who says: “There is no room at the inn!” Upon further study, Robb shares that according to commentary: “A small, poor village like Bethlehem would not have had an inn. Rather, in most homes, the animals were kept downstairs, while the upper part of the house consisted of a [bedrooms].”¹ Robb argues: “...Perhaps we should see [the innkeeper] as someone who took them in, who made room for them. Such an innkeeper would be an example to us of how to be a good neighbor.”²

Robb shows us that from this story we “learn the importance of welcoming people into our homes and lives, even when it is inconvenient or difficult.”³ Scripture reminds us that we are always called to make room for God in our hearts and in our lives.

The Scripture from Isaiah 64 is a plea for God to come down to earth and live among us. It is a reminder that “God is the potter and we are the clay” (Isaiah 64:8).

I believe that today we have this same plea on our hearts. That God would come down and save us from the pandemic, from pain and suffering, and from evil. This is the desire of our hearts.

Mark 13 gives us comfort that God will send us signs that the kingdom of God will be revealed. The problem is “no one knows the day or hour that Christ will return” so we have to keep alert (Mark 13:32).

A couple of years ago I heard an interesting story. There was a pastor preparing to meet his congregation for the first time in worship. However instead of going as himself, he dressed up like a homeless man to see how his new congregation would react to him.

When he entered the sanctuary, the congregation seemed to be distracted as they were awaiting the arrival of their new pastor. People didn't seem to have time for him or even want to greet him, some even gave him dirty looks. Eventually he was reluctantly seated by one of the ushers.

When it came time for the new pastor to be introduced, the congregation gasped as this seemingly homeless man introduced himself to his new congregation. In this action he preached his first sermon to his church. Echoing the Scripture from Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

When we think about Christ coming into the world. He did it in an unexpected way. He came as a baby and relied on humanity to care for him. When Christ returns, I believe it will be in an unexpected way, it may even be in the form of a homeless person.

I tell you this story because our faith teaches us to see Christ in the eyes of each person we encounter because they are a child of God. Being a Christian is not easy. In fact, it is difficult. Our faith calls us to disrupt our plans and to help those in need. Our faith calls us to make room at the table when we don't have any more chairs left. Our faith calls us to make room for others even in a season of quarantine.

Christine Pohl wrote a powerful book also called: “Making Room.” In it she shares: "the term hospitality has lost its moral dimension and, in the process, most Christians have lost touch with the amazingly rich and complex tradition of hospitality..."

For the people of ancient Israel, understanding themselves as strangers and sojourners, with responsibility to care for vulnerable strangers in their midst, was part of what it meant to be the people of God.”⁴

The Gospels remind us that Christ and the disciples also relied on this kind of hospitality. As they went from place to place people took them in and provided for their needs.

We also are called to explore the moral and Christian dimension of hospitality. We do this through the lens of hope.

The first week of Advent is all about hope. We extend hospitality when we see a way forward for those who are lost or in need of care. We extend hospitality when we make room for God in our lives.

I remember going on a retreat once where we ate all our meals with a small group of people. As we sat down there was a chair that was empty. Before we ate, we prayed together, and the leader asked if everyone was there. Well we looked around and everyone seemed to be accounted for. She told us she set an extra place for Christ at the table.

She did this as a reminder that Christ is always with us and Christ continues to be a beacon of hope for us.

I wonder if we could take on this practice during the season of Advent. We may even have some empty chairs due to the restrictions of the pandemic.

The question before us today is how can we continue to make room for Christ and our neighbor every day?

How can we be intentional about embodying the hope of Christ to the world?

We make room for Christ in our lives when we recognize that the purpose of our lives is to honor God with everything we say and everything we do.

We make room for Christ when we stop and help a neighbor in need. Especially during this season, we make room for Christ when we reach out to our neighbors who are feeling isolated or who need extra care.

Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you this week as God reveals to you the people in your life in need of hope and support.

The good news for our lives today is that we are called to wait with expectant hope. This is the state of our souls. This is God’s gift to us that every day we have something to be hopeful about until Christ returns in victory.

Do you find yourself in need of hope today? 2020 has been a very difficult year for all of us for so many different reasons. You may feel like you can’t make any more room in your life right now for God or other people.

But let me tell you a little secret. Just making a little room can make a big difference.

When I met my best friend Ashley in seminary, I was not looking for a new friend. In fact, I was trying to keep to myself. I had enough to worry about just with the academic side of Duke.

Yet she persistently kept asking me to hang out and one day I finally relented. Making a little room for a new friend in my life turned into a lifelong friendship and now a colleague in ministry.

It is amazing what God does with even a little room.

I challenge you this week to set a place for Christ at the table as you read the Scripture in your Advent calendar or candle readings.

Reach out to someone who needs hope. Contribute the items we need to make the Christmas bags for the children in our community so that they know that we care.

Open your heart to Christ this Advent season and let hope seep into your soul and fill you up.

Christ is coming so let us never lose hope. May God help us make room for hope today and always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Ed Robb. “Making Room.” Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 2020. P. 7.

² Ibid. P. 8.

³ Ibid. P. 9.

⁴ Christine Pohl. “Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition.” William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, MI. 1999. P. 4 & 5.