

Hello, church!

Grace and peace to you from your ecumenical siblings. I bring you greetings from the member traditions of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. We represent two thousand congregations in Wisconsin – nearly one million Christians. Courage, justice, and holy imagination are animating principles for the work and prayer we undertake together

Wherever you are, whenever you watch this, know that time and grace expand to hold us in one community.

Hear this reading from Howard Thurman's *Meditations of the Heart*:

I seek the enlargement of my heart that there may be room for Peace.

Already there is room enough for chaos. There is in every day's experience much that makes for confusion and bewilderment.

Often I do not understand quite how my relations with others become frayed and chaotic. Sometimes this chaos is a positive thing; it means that something new, creative and whole is beginning to pull together the tattered fragments of my relationship with a person and to fashion it into that which delights the spirit and makes glad the heart.

Sometimes the chaos is negative, a sign of degeneration in a relationship once meaningful and good. There is room enough for chaos. But the need of my heart is for room for Peace: Peace of mind that inspires singleness of purpose; Peace of heart that quiets all fears and uproots all panic; Peace of spirit that filters through all confusions and robs them of their power.

These I see NOW.

I know that here in this quietness my life can be infused with Peace.
Therefore, before God, I seek the enlargement of my heart at this moment,
that there may be room enough for Peace.

Please pray with me.

God of all spaces, and all times, help us know your presence with us.

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable
in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The activities of a church youth group can seem like mayhem incarnate. Likewise, behind-the-scenes at any theater production. When you put them together, well, God have mercy on us all. Imagine with me, people rushing here and there, trying to find their place, their costumes, attaching the right scrap of fabric to the right head, and where did that ladder go? To level it up, add live sheep and a live baby. Pure chaos. Thankfully, it was more creative chaos, the kind which generally pulls people together.

When I was a teenager, for several years running, I played the part of Mary, kneeling in the muddy snow outdoors for our church's Living Nativity. "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me as you have said." This became The Thing We Did every December. It was repeated so many times that the words from the Nativity story are embedded in my heart. I know the music we used and the cues well enough to replay it in my head.

The lights would go out after the Annunciation and I would run to meet Joseph. We would head slowly up a spotlighted path to an oddly placed door in the churchyard, while recorded music played. *Knock, knock knock went Joseph, at the door in Bethlehem, went the song. Can you shelter a family and be a help to them?..... 'No room, no room,' said the man in Bethlehem.*

Our friend playing the role of innkeeper couldn't quite slam the door in our face for fear of knocking it over, but the point was made. No room. Not in dozens of repetitions. Our pantomime of the conditions of Luke's story continued. Rain, snow, cold, sheep eating bales of hay out from underneath us. Recast parts when people went off to college, real babies, doll babies – we knew our roles well.

Not every experience of this story is creative and warm-hearted. Too much, as Thurman puts it, is 'confusion and bewilderment.' The reality is that this isn't just a December story confined to Advent or Christmas Eve. The knock at the door, and the surrounding chaos are not only in the pages of our Bibles. The trappings of empire and the violence it begets have thrown us all into upheaval. There is little to reassure us or make us feel safe. We knock at doors seeking comfort and are turned away. The refrain the world offers is 'no room, not enough, perhaps another day but not you, not now'.

This is an everyday story, all over the world and here close to home – perhaps in your own life. It conveys pain, disconnection, and mistrust. Mass displacement and uncertainty because of the machinations of powers beyond your sight. Refugees in diaspora, people seeking asylum because of war, climate change, political, ethnic or religious persecution. Homelessness and economic distress as well. Is there a place I can afford to live? Is there someone who will take a chance on me? Is there a job, or will I be turned away again? Seeking medical care, mental health care: will they have a treatment that works? is *anyone* accepting new patients? How far off is that appointment I need?

What this story helps us see is that the chaos in the heart which comes from this uncertainty is real and deeply painful. Multiply it by the millions who are asking such questions, and it feels like the entire cosmos is raging with chaos. Thousands of years have passed and we are still in Bethlehem of Judea seeking shelter. And there *you* may be, too, seemingly held apart, "no room," the constant refrain.

But the Gospel declares, despite all this: God has a habit of breathing peace over chaos, of creating anew where everything seems broken and dim. There is a way for the Holy One to break in.

What *is* it that pulls together the frayed edges? Widening the scope of our vision; enlarging the table; making room in the heart? If there is no guest-space, we make a more humble guest-space. Is there no peace? Jesus makes room for peace.

Presence and practice make possibility. Amid the chaos that isolates, we see over and over again that the ways of Jesus create community. Of course there are profound difficulties which must not be minimized. Even so, against every limiting condition, we see aspects of freedom, the possibility for integrity and hope.

Howard Thurman also wrote a book titled *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which he asserts this: "It is true that [a man] cannot be serene unless he possesses something about which to be serene."¹

That is the essence of the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the answer to violence, and the threat of violence: that God cares for you. God who created the stars, the sheep, the crisp winter air and the warm summer nights. It is no small thing.

There is little about *this* time which invites us to serenity. Amid such conditions, such a vision of divine love is essential to survival. Mine, yours, our neighbors', the world's. Knowing that God loves *you*, makes room in this universe for *you*: this makes you *unconquerable*. No power can overcome such love.

So we return to the Gospel and this morning's meditation. The presence and activity of Jesus remakes our understanding of the cosmos. This is the moment of creative chaos that knits together community; that tells a new story.

¹ Jesus and the Disinherited, 45

'Open the doors wide,' this tiny being breathes. 'It is time to make all things new!' That moment of creativity leads to something profoundly right, joyful, hopeful, and grounding. It is the polar opposite of what we have been offered by the world of late.

You may at this moment, be holding more than your fair share of discordant chaos. The temptation is sometimes to declare it all impossible and close up shop. But the Jesus story, as it always does, shows us a different way.

God loves you. God made room in the universe for you.

God whose Spirit moved in a newly created world, seeing nothing but goodness. Making a place for everything, and everyone, and you. A home. A table. A community. A place of peace amid all of this, for you.

If you are filled with chaos, and fear that you have space for nothing else, I invite you to open the doors of your heart. Make a guestroom. Enlarge your heart that there may be room for singleness of purpose. For the One who quiets fears and uproots panic, who robs confusion of its power.

This is how we remake our lives; our community; the cosmos.

Jesus is the One who Makes Room.

Enlarge my heart, Jesus.

Enlarge *our* hearts, that there might be room for peace.

Amen.