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Christmas 2014

In a sheep field in Tekoa just outside of Jerusalem, there is a cave. It is one of those places I wouldn't have known about or even noticed had not the leader of the pilgrimage taken us there.

And in fact, the cave is so unassuming from the outside that even our leader, with an archeology PhD from Harvard, didn't notice anything special about it until he quite literally stumbled into it on a rainy afternoon a few decades ago.

But there is something special about it. Very special in fact. The cave is a first century inn. That is to say, it is a perfectly preserved example of the place in which there was no room for Joseph and his very pregnant fiancée.

Many of you have heard me talk about my trip to Jerusalem last spring. You know that I was far more interested and inspired by the less touristy, less obvious sights that we saw. And the cave in the sheep field in the middle of nowhere was one of the highlights for me.

We scrambled down into the dark space and found ourselves in a two-chambered room, almost heart-shaped. Neither chamber was very big, smaller than our narthex, with a low ceiling. There was a hole in the ceiling of one side that served as a chimney, as evident by the soot all around it. The two chambers were divided by a knee-high stone wall.

We learned that one chamber of the heart-shaped space—the side with the chimney-- was for people, who would lay their blankets on the floor and lie down on them. On the other side of the low wall was where the animals would be stabled, in the same cave, separated by just that pile of stones.

The idea that there was no room for the holy family was probably not exactly true. There was always space in inns like these, just squeeze your blanket in between the folks on the floor. Nudge them out of the way and lie down. People slept side-by-side like sardines in a can. Maybe not comfortable, but warm and safe for the night.

What there was no room for was birth. Birth is not a clean, quiet business. Birth is not something to be accomplished while squished, sardine-like, between two strangers. Birth is a disruptive event.

So in truth, the innkeeper who gave them space in the animal side of the room, amid the hooves and fur, was looking out for the several dozen people asleep together on the other side. It was probably a decision that combined practicality—he certainly wouldn't involve the other paying customers in all that beautiful mess of birth-- with compassion—he wouldn't put the distressed mother out in the cold. And so space, strange, furry, inappropriate space, was found.

This part of our story, by itself, the national registration, the pregnant couple with nowhere to go, space in the animals' lodgings, the inconvenient birth, none of it is miraculous. None of it, on its own, is particularly noteworthy.

No one, in this part of the story, does anything out of character. The governor calls for a census, the innkeeper thinks of his business, the mother births a baby, the cow chews her cud.

Except that everything has changed. With this sequence of events, the world has shifted. With this birth, heaven and earth are met. With this sequence of events, a tiny baby born under inconvenient circumstances disrupted everything.

That is to say, love disrupted everything. And thank God that it did.

Because, this Christmas we could use a little reminder to pay attention to the disruptions that love brings. We could use a reminder in this darkness, when so many of our disruptions look more like Guantanamo, Ferguson or Peshawar, that light can be disruptive, too. That if we only pay attention to that darkness and the desolation we will miss the power of disruptive, radical, impossible love in the world.

One lesson of that cold dark cave filled with the breath of animals is that love can grow, even where least expected. It is not always clean and easy, love can be unpredictable and complicated. It can be disruptive. But it is there. It is here. It is all around us.

Love, love makes things grow. And the things that it makes grow are the things we all need to survive when the darkness closes in. Love grows relationships. Love grows hope. Love grows faith. Love grows children. Around here, love grows coat drives and refugee apartments and freezers full of meals. Love grows community. Love grows the kingdom of God.

Our Christian story is not always an easy one. Parts of our story are not about love. They are not about expectation and hope. They are about other things, fear and pain, hatred and evil.

But this is the season where we remember the part of the story where love convinces a young woman to say "yes" to something ridiculous and outlandish. This is the part of the story where love helps birth a baby in entirely uncomfortable circumstances.

This is the part of the story where disruptive and inconvenient love draws a strange and motley community around that child, gifting him and his family with community and resources despite their strange situation. This is the part of the story where love grows as that child grows, in leaps and bounds, unexpected and confusing.

You know a little about disruptive love. I know you do because I've seen you receive it and practice it. I've talked with you about the new family of refugees and how their arrival has changed your life. I've witnessed a small group surround you with nearly suffocating support as you battled your addiction. I've sat in a room at Piedmont where a parade of parishioners came

through with food, hands to hold, flowers, prayers. I have seen you struggle with the changing tides of society, trying hard to understand, getting frustrated, trying again. I have watched you come into loving yourself, then putting your true self forward to be loved.

These are your stories. I have seen love change you, disrupt you, turn your head from the mundane, pull you away from the darkness. And in this Christmas season, I encourage you to keep it up. Because every time we allow love to disrupt our lives, our world changes for the better. Every time we are inconvenienced by love, the course of our own history shifts.

Mary said “yes” to the ultimate disruption. Joseph agreed to be her companion on the disruptive journey. The innkeeper allowed them to disrupt his evening.

And God was born, disrupting everything with love.

Go forth on this good night to be inconvenienced and to challenge the darkness, to disturb the desolation, to fill the world with the good news that love, the great disruptor, is born this day.