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Room in the Inn

Pete Hyatt & Peter Hiett Luke 2:1-7 December 24, 2003

[Peter walks onto stage wearing a white tuxedo, there's a cigar in his mouth, and he's holding a martini glass.]

How ya doin'? Comfortable? It's good to be back. Do you remember me? I was with you six years ago at that run-down dirt-bag Sheraton Motel. That place is a dive. My name is Pete Hyatt, owner and founder of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. I opened my first hotel in a little town named Bethlehem—the Hyatt Bethlehem. Bethlehem means House of Bread. I'm the guy they say missed Christmas, the "innkeeper." I prefer "CEO." (I was also COO, accountant, manager, marketing director . . .)

Well, along about 0, I had my hands full. [Singing:] "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie . . ." NOT! It was the time of the census, and they hadn't yet figured out that when you take a census, you could, like, go to the people. No! The Romans made all the people—the world—go to them, just so some old Roman could sit on his can and count Jews: 1 Jew, 2 Jew, 3 Jew . . . or should I say 3 Jew, 2 Jew, 1 Jew.

You see, on top of everything else, we were having some real accounting troubles. We were making the switch from B.C. to A.D.; I had to keep reminding myself, "Stop countin' backwards! It's not B.C.—it's A.D." We'd been countin' backwards as long as anyone could remember . . . 10 B.C., 9 B.C., 8 B.C. . . we were getting down to zero and wondering, "What's at O?"

Some of my friends in the hotel business had the theory a holiday was coming up. So they capitalized on the idea, opened up a place down the street, and called it the Holiday Inn. Somebody opened Caesar's Palace, hoping to attract Roman hotshots. At the Hyatt, we ran a special on salad and called it Caesar Salad. We had a jingle [singing to the tune of "Copacabana"]: "At the Hyatt, Hyatt of Bethlehem, music and passion are always in fashion at the Hyatt . . . don't fall in love. Hyatt of Bethlehem (don't fall in love), Hyatt of Bethlehem."

Don't fall in love. Why? Because real love is bad for business.

The Hyatt of Bethlehem. Granted, at the time, it probably wasn't what you'd call a hotel. It was me and my family downstairs, and an upper sort of room for guests, with a stable out back for their animals. It was more like a house really, the Hyatt House.

Ever since I was a kid, I had this dream of a hotel. Famous people, powerful people, well traveled and mysterious people would stay there. Then *I'd* be famous, powerful, well traveled, and mysterious too. I'd own the world: hotel for the world.

And along about 0, it seemed to be working. I had a couple Romans staying upstairs . . . I was movin' and shakin' . . . doin' business . . . See it's not like I was what you'd call a bad guy. I was in Rotary, I was chairman of the Synagogue Relief Committee; I wasn't a monster, just *busy*, real *busy*, like you.

And that's how it happened—no time, no space, no place—when late one night I hear a knock on the door and find these two tramps out front. He looks like a common laborer, and she acts like she's *in* labor. I'm humming to myself, "At the Hyatt, Hyatt of Bethlehem . . ." and they don't look like Hyatt material. He says, "Sir, may we have a room? My wife is great with child." I think to myself, "She doesn't look that great to me, just a peasant kid. I bet she's conning me with the labor and delivery routine. They probably aren't even married."

I say, "The outreach is down the street."

He says, "Sir, the outreach is full, and my betrothed is pregnant, ready to deliver."

I say, "Pregnant . . . well, buddy, that's not my fault."

In absolute seriousness he says, "It's not my fault either."

I start to laugh, but he looks at me like I'm laughing at the virgin mother of God, a saint or something.

Well, I didn't have time for this, so I said, "There's no room in the inn." He begged, and I said, "Look, kid, there's a stable out back," and I shut the door. It was that easy. I just shut the door.

Later that night, along with my wife Susanna and my baby boy Moisha, I'd just settled down for a long winter's nap, when out on the street there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. My neighbors are yelling, "Shut up, you stupid, drunk shepherds!" And sure enough. These flea-bag shepherds are running through the streets screaming, "Angels! Angels! We saw huge, glowing, scary angels, and they said, 'Tonight in town is born a Savior, Christ the Lord, the Messiah." Please understand: The Messiah was to Bethlehem like aliens are to Roswell, New Mexico. City of David, the prophecies, etc., etc.

One of the shepherds sees me and screams, "Mr. Hyatt! We're looking for a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." I'm thinking, "Yep, they're drunk." And then, all at once, I remember those two tramps, and I point out back. The shepherds take off behind the house to the stable. Not knowing what to do, I reassured the Romans everything was kosher and then climbed up onto the roof. From our roof, you could look down onto the stable out back.

I couldn't believe what I saw. She hadn't been conning me! She must've given birth in the donkey stall. You could still smell the blood and fluid. They'd wrapped the baby in rags and put

him in the feed bin. Now, that's *weird*, but that kind of stuff happened to poor people all the time. It was just a baby. What freaked me out was the shepherds. I knew these guys. They were sleazebags, but now they had thrown themselves face down in the slop around the manger. And I could see they were trembling. Those empty-headed shepherds actually believed this was the Messiah!

And I wondered: What if? Just what if it is?

I don't know how long I stayed on the roof. Normally I don't have time or space for crazy thoughts like that, to wonder as I wander, but I lost myself just staring at the stable. I wondered, What if? I had said there was no room at the inn because they were too *small*. They were beneath me. They didn't fit in at the Hyatt, and obviously they couldn't pay. I'd have to forgive them their hotel bill. Forgive is an accounting term. Forgive is like a swear word to a business man. It's bad business.

But what if? What if? What if the shepherds were right? Then the baby wasn't too small; he was way too *big*.

You get tangled in business with the big boys, and you can lose your shorts. Know what I mean? I figured God was a big boy and quite a business man. I figured if God was like the priests or Pharisees or me, He was at least a shrewd businessman and probably ran a racket.

I heard Rabbi Joseph once talked to God. He said, "God, is it true that to you one minute is like 1000 years and 1000 years like a minute?" God said, "Yes, Joseph, this is true." And Joseph said, "So, God, is it also true that to you one penny is like a million dollars and a million dollars like a penny?" And God said, "Yes, Joseph, this is also true." So Joseph says, "God, could I just have one of your pennies?" And God said, "Yes . . . just a minute."

That's a joke, yeah, but that's how I thought of God: a shrewd businessman with impeccable accounting, who always, always collected on His debt. So I figured, if this was the Messiah, it was best to act like I didn't know, and I didn't want to know. I couldn't afford Him, appease Him, get tangled in business with Him; I couldn't think about Him. It's what we all do; it's just too much, too big. We're middle class, you know, nothing too small, and nothing too big. . . . everything medium.

The baby was either too small or way, way too big. And what if He was both too small and too big all at once?

The kings of this world are always medium. I can do business with them; I understand them. But if this was the Messiah, His smallness made Him *huge* . . . inconceivable! He wouldn't fit in my inn; he wouldn't fit in my head; he wouldn't fit in my heart; he wouldn't fit in my world.

My inn was full of the world; my head was full of business; my heart was full of me. I had no room for compassion or forgiveness.

This was business.

I had no room for grace.

I had to balance the books.

I had no room for mercy.

People had to pay their debts.

I had no room for wonder, because

I had it all figured out and under control.

I had no room for faith.

My business ran like a machine.

I had no room for salvation.

I always carried insurance and extra in the bank.

I had no room for love (maybe lust, not love).

Love can get you crucified.

I had no room for God.

He'd just blow my comfortable, little, middle class world to smithereens.

I felt these things as I stared at the manger. And I remember thinking: My life is so full of everything, maybe my heart has no room for anything. Maybe my heart is so small, hard, and dead, there's no room for anything . . . except Moisha . . . Moisha. And he'd snuck in on me.

I'd only thought of myself, and then I had a baby—my son. They're born small; they get in your heart, grow, and crack it open, like a root grows in a crack in a rock and busts the rock open.

- I remembered hearing that Isaiah called the Messiah a root. And I wondered: Would God make Himself small to enter my heart, grow, and crack it open?
- I wondered what He wanted. Room? There was no room in the inn. But there was room in the manger, because it was empty.
- I looked at the stable. Those mangy shepherds were holding the baby now. *They* had room . . . maybe because they were empty, broken, humble.
- I was starting to feel empty too. Bethlehem was now still, yet the night seemed alive with music just beyond what I could hear.
- I wanted to go down there, throw myself down before the manger, and cry, "Come in! Come in! There's always room in the inn!"

I had just about forgotten myself and lost myself when I heard it: a voice, almost audible. It didn't say, "Kill the Christ Child" or "Worship Satan"; just one word: "bagels." And I thought, "Oh, no! What about the bagels and the Romans and the complimentary breakfast buffet included for just \$49.95?" I jumped up, ran downstairs, cursing myself and saying, "Pete, get real! You've got business to take care of!"

And that's how it happened. No room in the inn.

For 2000 years, people have judged me for saying, "There's no room in the inn." But you say it too when you're too busy to pray, too vengeful to forgive; every time you hurry past a beggar because you've got business to take care of. No room in the inn. The issue isn't room in the inn; it's room in your *life*, because you're full of yourself.

Room in the inn: It's like a joke! No room for the one who made space itself; no time for the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. But there was room in the manger. Its inside was bigger than all the outside, for it contained the One who made space and time itself.

But I had no room. I shut the door, just shut the door.

It's so frightening that you can just shut the door on life . . . on God. You've thought, "If there's a God, He'd make it obvious," just like I thought, "If God wants into my inn, He'd just bust the door down." That's what the Romans do: They just bust the door down. That's what King Herod would do: Just bust the door down. But maybe God is not like the Romans or Herod.

- I kissed up to the Romans, but I hated the Romans. I let them into my hotel but not my heart.
- I kissed up to King Herod, but I hated King Herod.
- I kissed up to God, and I think I hated God. You see, even if I let Him into my inn, I wouldn't have let Him into my heart.

For 1500 years, we Jews had kissed up to God. I think we hated God. It wasn't just me that had no room.

Well, in the morning, the little family was gone . . . stayed with some relatives or something. There were stories . . . wizards from the East . . . I heard the young family left. And then it happened. All my dreams died. Herod's men didn't knock; they just busted the door down, ripped my two-year-old screaming Moisha from my arms, and ran a sword through his heart. All of Bethlehem was an open wound.

King Herod was terrified of the baby born in my stable. And I was too. I figured Moisha was payment for my debt against the Holy One of Israel. The shepherds, magi, the terror of Herod, the death of my only son: It all equaled my secret terror. It was the Messiah on whom I'd shut the door, and not just once in Bethlehem, but time and time again. I figured I was damned.

And then I really did shut the door for thirty years, thirty years terrorized that God would come demanding payment on my debts. Nothing was allowed into my world bigger than me and my control. Definitely not people; people are worlds in themselves, and they can hurt you. I was the innkeeper vacant of life with no room for people, only me and my wound alone in Hell, a Hell no larger than myself. I don't think anything's smaller than Hell, and the door is locked from the inside.

It's ironic. In those thirty years, business grew. Yet it was no longer my dream; it was my addiction.

Well, anyways, along about 30 A.D., I started hearing stories about Jesus the Nazarene. I knew it was Him; He called Himself the Bread of Life. He grew up in Nazareth, but He came from the House of Bread: Bethlehem. I heard He healed people and preached good news. I was scared of Him but intrigued by Him. By then, I was living in Jerusalem. We'd opened the downtown Hyatt Jerusalem. So when He came to town, I'd hide in the crowds and listen.

One day some of His disciples followed me home and said, "The teacher says to you, 'Where is the room where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?" I didn't know what to say, so I gave them our upper room. They had supper and left.

The next day, I followed the crowds to the Praetorium, then to Calvary. I watched in shock as those priests and Pharisees and Herod and the Romans together strung Him up on a cross, as naked as the night He was born in my stable. I heard Him scream, "Father, forgive them," and something else. Then I watched Him die. You see, I was not the only one who shut the door on Jesus. No room in the inn? Try, no room in this whole, sick world.

I walked home in a pouring rainstorm. My head was spinning. He had said, "Father, forgive them," and "It is finished," like He was taking care of business. That's crazy business, to forgive them! Would He forgive me? Then I wondered: "Did God take Moisha as payment for my debts or something else?" I thought, "The same group that killed Moisha killed Jesus, the only Son of God." Then I thought, "Does God feel what I feel? Does God hurt like I hurt? Is God where I am? Could God get that small, small enough to descend into Hell, *my* Hell?"

Well, I think something took root in Hell that day.

Now, you know the story. He rose from the dead. An old shepherd told me He was the lamb slain for the sins of the world. It was then I thought, "That would mean Moisha wasn't payment for my debts, but Jesus, Son of God, *was*." I didn't know what to make of all that.

For about six weeks, no one heard much of Jesus' disciples. Actually, I let some of them stay in our upper room. They looked so confused, bewildered, and desperate. They kind of reminded me of Jesus' daddy on that fateful night thirty years before. For the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), they had some friends over to pray.

I stayed downstairs. By then my family was gone, and I was an old man—an old, broken, empty man. I sat down and for the first time in thirty years, I muttered a prayer: "God, I got nothin'. I'm sorry. Forgive me." I broke, sobbing. A proud business man never says, "Forgive me." I thought, "If only I could do it over, I'd invite Him in. I'd give Him my room."

Just then, I hear the sound of this mighty wind, the house shakes, I see tongues of fire. They knock me back on my can, and I was gone. When I came to, everything looked different—same, but different—like I had new eyes. I had compassion, mercy, grace, faith, hope, and love, and I knew God had me covered and that God had Moisha. I was shaking like a drunk shepherd, and then I thought I heard drunk shepherds. It was the guys in the upper room. I ran up there, and one of them stood up saying, "Hey, everybody, these guys aren't drunk. This is what was prophesied: 'In the last days I'll pour out my Spirit on all flesh And your old men will dream dreams.'"

Then it hit me:

- My dreams (the hopes and fears of all the years) had died, but now they were back bigger than ever, way bigger!
- My dreams had never been too big but always too small, too small to hold Him.
- You see, if the Hyatt Hotel was a chain of hotels reaching around the world, if the Hyatt Hotel could hold the whole world itself... Woopie Twang! I am the Hyatt Hotel! designed and manufactured to hold the very presence of the living God. And He is bigger than the world, all space and time; mysterious, well traveled, powerful. He is life and love.

[Singing] "At the Hyatt, the Pete Hyatt, music and passion are always in fashion at the Hyatt . . . He fell in love."

That day on Pentecost, I became a living nativity scene. God had made room in my dead heart. All along He was making space for faith in grace, Heaven in the midst of Hell—space for Himself, Love, Jesus.

So, you see, I did not miss Christmas.

And neither should you.

The guy in the upper room continued: "And it shall be in that day that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." It happens in different ways. Sometimes tongues of fire, sometimes "how silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." Either way, "that day" is Christmas Eve. Open the door and invite Him in.

[Congregational Song: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"]

[Peter returns to the stage, dressed as himself.]

It was the second grade Christmas pageant in London, Ontario. They'd given the part of the innkeeper to the big, slow kid Ralph, because he only had one line to remember. He practiced over and over: "There's no room in the inn." Everyone was worried he'd mess up.

The night of the pageant comes. Little Mary and Joseph come to the door, and Ralph says his line: "There's no room in the inn." Mary and Joseph turn away dejected, and Ralph stares. He leaves the inn door open. His chin quivers, and his eyes fill with tears. He yells after them, "Joseph! Mary! Wait! You can have *my* room!"

And that's the point. He wants your room . . . and you.

Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

If you're full of yourself, proud of yourself, competent in yourself, like you own the world, you'll have a hard time with Christmas and with Judgment Day.

If, on the other hand, you feel empty, you feel "poor in spirit," well, blessed are you. If you're "mourning" and feeling "meek," blessed are you. If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, because you feel empty of righteousness, blessed are you.

If you feel like you don't fit in this world because you're too small and ugly, perhaps in truth you are too large and beautiful. The inside of that old manger was bigger and more glorious than this whole world.

If you feel like old, weathered wood, covered in spit and snot, and held together with rusty nails, forgotten in some old stable out back behind the resort hotel where the world parties, *blessed are you*. You are where the Christ is born.

Empty that you might be full forever. Open the door and invite Him in.

Ann Lamott was a drug addict and alcoholic who'd just had an abortion and hated Christians. She had a vision of Jesus and felt He wouldn't leave. He followed her around. Finally, she hung her head, cursed, and said, "All right. You can come in." And He did. You can read about it in her book *Traveling Mercies*, where she writes, "And here in dust and dirt, O here, the lilies of His love appear" (George Herbert).

You don't have to understand. You don't need a lot of faith. You can pray, "I believe. Help my unbelief." Just realize that you're empty, and call on Jesus to fill you.

My friend Phil told me of a Christian woman he met in France. She grew up in Thailand in a household that hated Christianity and wouldn't allow it. When she was seven years old, her father was flipping channels on the TV when he accidentally landed for a moment on some TV preacher. Before her father could change the channel, this girl heard, "There was no room for Jesus in the inn." She got up, went outside under the stars, looked up, and said, "Jesus, there's room for you here." And she woke up a new person in spite of persecution and solitude. She followed Jesus all her life, until that day Phil met her in France.

In the upper room, that night He was betrayed, it was Christmas. The Bread of Life (Jesus) took bread, blessed it, and broke it saying, "Take and eat. This is my body." And He took a cup, and when He'd given thanks, He gave it to them saying, "Drink of it all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

He took care of business for us, that He might live His life in us forever.

On October 3, 1999, in our old building, we were passing the bread at the first service. Michelle told me that she took the bread because she was with some Christian friends and didn't want to look bad. She wasn't ready to invite Jesus in, because she felt she didn't fully understand. The idea of Jesus was just too big, and she'd been too busy to give it much thought. She told me she

took just a little piece, went to swallow, and it wouldn't go down. She tried again, and the bread wouldn't go down. She started to panic. She didn't want to make a scene struggling and choking with this little piece of bread, but it wouldn't go down.

You see, I suspect her heart was too full or too small, and Jesus was just too big. She struggled and struggled and then prayed silently, "OK, I can't figure it out. Do what you want. You can come in." At that, she swallowed. Jesus had gotten small. And for Michelle, that was Christmas . . . in October and forever.

Now, Jesus doesn't always do the bread thing. So no matter what, He wants you to ask Him in by faith. We're saved by His grace through faith, not whether or not we can swallow. But beware: In some way, this is the body and blood. Ingest Him, and He can just blow your world apart. So don't partake if you don't want Him. If you do want Him, tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, open the door, and take Him in.

If you think you are worthy of Him, you're not. If you confess you're unworthy, you are. You see, this isn't business. It's the gift of God, and for you it's Christmas *forever*.

If I was Jesus on that first Christmas Eve, I think what I'd want the most is for someone to open the door and let me in. And that's what you did tonight if you came forward. I think He would say, "Thank you."

By way of benediction, let's say Merry Christmas to Jesus. He actually is here. Merry Christmas, Jesus! In His name, amen.

Relevant Texts and Quotations (from bulletin)

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

-Psalm 24:7

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

-Luke 2:1-7

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. . . . And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

-Acts 2:1-4, 12-17, 21

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

-Revelation 3:20

Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.

-Charles Wesley

God creates everything out of nothing – and everything which God is to use He first reduces to nothing.

-Soren Kierkegaard

But holiness is not a personal achievement. It's an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew.

-St. Francis of Assisi

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

-Oscar Romero

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

-Matthew 5:3-6

To the astonished question of when and where, he answered: "What you did to the least of these, you have done to me . . ." (Matt. 25:40). With that we are faced with the shocking reality: Jesus stands at the door and knocks, in complete reality. He asks you for help in the form of a beggar, in the form of a ruined human being in torn clothing. He confronts you in every person that you meet. Christ walks on the earth as your neighbor as long as there are people.

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of *this* world, the Real World. Look at you butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or to have any taste."

"It seems big enough when you're in it, Sir."

"And yet all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that it contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all. Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good is good. If all Hell's miseries together entered the consciousness of yon wee yellow bird on the bough there, they would be swallowed up without a trace, as if one drop of ink had been dropped into that Great Ocean to which your terrestrial Pacific itself is only a molecule."

"I see," said I at last. "She couldn't fit into Hell."

He nodded. "There's not room for her," He said. "Hell could not open its mouth wide enough."

"And she couldn't make herself smaller? – like Alice, you know?"

"Nothing like small enough. For a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself. Good beats down upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food or their eyes to see."

"Then no one can ever reach them?"

"Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell. For the higher a thing is, the lower it can descend – a man can sympathize with a horse but a horse cannot sympathize with a rat. Only One has descended into Hell."

"And will He ever do so again?"

"It was not once long ago that He did it. Time does not work that way when once we have left the Earth. All moments that have been or shall be were, or are, present in the moment of His descending. There is no spirit in prison to whom He did not preach."

-C. S. Lewis, The Great Divorce

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