

“Keeper”

Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 12/24/06 (Christmas Eve 5:30 pm)

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It seems that history has not favored me. Every time the story of that night is told, every time there is a bathrobe pageant reenacting what happened, I'm the one who is left looking like the real villain of that night. The one who was willing to send Mary and Joseph back out into cold. The one who forced a pregnant mother to deliver her child in a stable.

Yes, I'm that innkeeper you so often hear spoken of in the Christmas story. But I'm really not a bad person. To be honest, I suspect I'm not all that different than any of you. I was just a man trying to make a living. A man trying to raise his family. But, of course, no one cares what it is like to be me. No one wants to hear my side of the story.

Being an innkeeper is a very busy job. You spend your entire day looking after the welfare of those who are staying with you. You have to get them food and drink. You have to bring them hot water to bathe. You have to care for their animals. You have to help them find the places they are going in town. All day long, all I ever hear is “Keeper! Come here! Get me this”; “Keeper! I need that.”

You see, it usually takes an entire family to run an inn. But I no longer have that luxury. Ever since my wife died, I not only have to handle the inn myself but I have to look after my two daughters – Ruth and Hannah. I wasn't really prepared for what life would be like without my beloved Rachel. All these years later and her loss still causes my heart to ache. Perhaps, it's that I never

was able to properly grieve her for as an innkeeper and father I was always busy. There never was time.

Well, on the night we've all heard tell of, my daughter Ruth was 11. And she really was a help. She worked a lot in the kitchen. From morning until night she helped prepare and serve food. I guess it was in her blood – the Keeper business. She liked looking after other folk. But as an eleven year old girl, she was already betrothed. Before her thirteenth birthday, she was married and expecting a child of her own to look after.

Hannah was 8. Nowhere in this world was there a more loving or more hardworking child than Hannah. Hannah would do anything I asked of her. Unfortunately, I learned years before that I couldn't have her working with the patrons at the inn. Many of them teased her mercilessly. You see, Hannah was about two when her mother died...and I don't know what it was...perhaps I didn't give her a good enough chance to grieve either...but somehow, the shock of her mother's death caused her to become mute. She didn't speak – not to me, not to her sister, not to anyone.

People can be cruel...and they were to my Hannah. People tend to lash out in hate at things they don't understand...at things that scare them. Why would anyone feel the need to make themselves feel *bigger* than a mute child who hadn't shown them anything but compassion, I'll never understand. While it wasn't everyone, it was enough folk. Every time it happened, I was furious. I wanted to lash back. I wanted to say things that would have not been good for business.

The worst were often the religious leaders. They, in the expensive robes and golden jewelry, acted superior to us working folk. Many of the scribes and teachers who stayed at my inn told me that a demon had control of my daughter's tongue. They'd jeer at her and chide her. They would tell her she was unclean and banish her from their sight. On several occasions, I was told that I should take her to the temple in Jerusalem to have the demon cast out. I thought it was bollix, all of it.

Now I don't claim to understand God any better than the next person. But I knew my daughter, and I knew there was no evil in her. A soul so full of caring couldn't possibly have room for a demon. She just needed a little of God's love to shine into some dark corner of her soul. But those scribes and teachers, they wielded religion like it was a weapon. They acted like they could control the power of God...and what it could and couldn't do. I often thought that they wouldn't recognize God if God came to earth and sat right down among them.

Oh, yes, I was telling you about that night, wasn't I? It had been some of the busiest days I can ever remember. Ceaser had called for a census, so every man that had ever been born in Bethlehem had to return with his family to be registered. People had been coming and going for days. All of them had traveled far and they wanted someone to care for them. For days, all I think I heard was "Keeper! Keeper! Keeper!" calling me from one task to the next.

That particular day had been the busiest of all. Every room in the inn was full before sunset. Actually, I had heard that every room in all of Bethlehem was full. Ruth was busy in kitchen and Hannah was feeding the animals in the stable.

I was lugging belongings to people's rooms...and fetching them water... and serving them drink. Things were so busy; I was on my last nerve as it was. Then, I heard one of our guests, the son of a tax collector from the town of Iphtah, coming in from the stable telling his brothers how that girl in the stable must be dumber than their donkey. I was filled with rage. I just hoped and prayed that Hannah hadn't heard what he said...this time...for I know she had heard it before. But before I could say anything or do anything, I heard a pounding on the door.

I went to the door to see what this calamity was going to be. There at the door was a man and a woman. Now I can't tell you much about how they looked because behind them was some really bright light...like a star gone crazy...it was so intense all that I could see was the couple cast in silhouette. I can tell you this though, the woman was pregnant. She looked like that baby would arrive before sun down the next day. The man pleaded with me: "Please sir! Please help us! My fiancé and I have traveled from Galilee. We need a room. She is due any day. We must have a place to stay!" Squinting, I replied to the backlit figure: "I'd like to help you. Really I would. But I have nothing. I've even rented out my own room. You'll need to try elsewhere." But the man pressed on, "Please sir, you must have someplace." And finally, I snapped. I couldn't handle it anymore. "Look I told you, I've got nothing. Nothing but problem of my own. And I can't handle anybody else's, so be gone with you!" And I slammed the door shut.

That decision haunted me the rest of the night. Every time I looked at smug son of a tax collector who was getting fat on the food and drink I was bring

to him, my blood boiled. I wondered how I could have found room for such as him in my inn, but turned away an expectant mother. Could Hannah ever forgive me for such a thing? Could God ever forgive me?

Finally, after everyone retired for the night, I sat in my chair in front of the fireplace, half awake, half asleep, lamenting my choice. Hannah came in from the stable and tugged on the sleeve of my cloak. I ignored her hoping she'd go away. She tugged again. "Not now Hannah", I mumbled. She tugged a third time. "What in God's name, is it?" I shouted. "Daddy, come here!" I heard her say.

Perhaps it was the shock of hearing her speak for the first time in six years, but I didn't know what to do. So I followed in silence. She took me out into the stable. She pointed me toward the corner where I saw that couple who had been at the front door lying and resting. At that moment, I was filled with so many different emotions. I was angry at the couple for taking advantage of Hannah's kindness. I was relieved they had found a warm dry place to stay. I was moved yet again by the depth of my daughter's compassion for others.

From within this whirlwind of emotions, I hardly noticed what Hannah was doing. But she had walked over to one of the feeding troughs and picked up a blanket. She brought it over to me and laid the blanket and its contents in my arms. It was a baby. Hannah looked up at me with her big brown eye and spoke yet again. "They named him Jesus."

Before I knew it I was crying. I was struck by the miracle of it all. I don't know whether it was Hannah speaking, or the couple finding a warm, dry place

when everything was full in all of Bethlehem, or the young baby I was holding in my arms. Perhaps it was all of these things...and more. All I knew was that a miracle had happened. Things were different. Somehow when I was too busy with my own problems to make changes in my life, God busted in and made things different. God changed things in my life when I least expected it.

I may have been the first visitor to see that baby...but I certainly wasn't the last. Later that night shepherds whose flocks grazed on the hills outside of town came telling the story of a host of angels who visited them. They were told this child was the Messiah – the savior of all of Israel. Weeks later some sages from the East arrived. They came to pay the respects of Herod the King. All kind of folks came to see that child believing he would somehow make their lives different too.

Interestingly, the one set of people who were notorious absent were the religious leaders – the scribes and the teachers. It seemed they could not conceive that God would act in any way out of their control. If God didn't stay in the neat little package they had created for God, then apparently they had no need of God. But if they could have only seen. If they could have only held that child in their arm, I'm sure they would have believed. They would have believed that child could return a mute girl's voice. They would have believed that child could heal anything. They would have believed that child could turn our world upside with nothing but love. I know I believe.

So now you've heard my side of the story...and perhaps you'll think a little better of me. That's the best I can expect. You see, history will always view me

as the keeper who would not keep care of the holy child. And in some ways this is true. I think we all have trouble keeping care of God's blessings. It is hard to take time out from our busy lives to see what God is up to. It is hard to set aside our problems – that which frustrates and frightens us – to keep hope in God.

But the truth I learned on that holy night is that it is God who is the ultimate keeper. God is the Keeper of all things. God keeps promises. God keeps covenant. And God keeps us in God's merciful care.

And to that, I say, "Amen."