



underthefigtree

KATALUMA

A Discussion Guide for Groups

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People love a royal event! When a future king or queen gets married, the entire world stops to take notice. When a Prince or Princess is handed the scepter and crown as a symbolic shift of duties, nations hold their breath. Babies born into a royal family are front-page news and their first photo op is sure to delight an already adoring crowd. Everyone is hopeful to get even a glimpse of the king!

When royalty is involved it is always a grand event (and there have been some grand events). Commerce and education and entertainment and all the elements that make a society tick... well, they stop ticking. They cease 'business as usual' to enjoy it. To welcome

it. To partake in it. The pomp and circumstance is completely appropriate. Because they are royalty. They seem worth the hoopla.

But this week's teaching reminds us that the High King of Heaven did not arrive to pomp and circumstance. In fact, Heaven's Royalty arrived into some dire circumstances; surrounded with animals and shepherds instead of royal attendants, swaddling clothes in place of royal robes. Hay instead of fine linens and down comforters. One might think that our all-knowing and all-powerful God might have been a better planner; or was this His plan? Let us gather around the manger to ponder this royal arrival.





The Text

Before you watch this session's video together, read the following passages:

Micah 5:2

Luke 2: 8-20

Luke 22: 24-27

Philippians 2: 1-8

The Teaching

Watch the video, "Kataluma." Review the background details before continuing with the talking points.

Vocabulary

Kataluma

guest room, lodging place, shelter

kenosis

to lose power, to make empty, come to nothing, deprive of content



Background Information

The story of the birth of the “King of the Jews” is one of the best known. But did Jesus birth in a stable look as it’s often been depicted? What is interesting is that there was no room for Jesus to be born in the inn; especially given, as Paul in Galatians 4:4 “when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman.” One would think that God the Father, given that He’s all knowing & all powerful, might have done a better job “planning” for His Son entry into our world by creating the appropriate space for a newborn. Instead, Jesus is not only wedged into a woman’s womb before she is completely married but also relegated to the stable because of the apparent overcrowding of guest rooms given the census!

The Greek word: kataluma is translated by most as “inn” but that is unfortunate given how most people picture an inn. A kataluma is simply a room or extra space which, in the event of visitors, can be converted to a guest room. The only other place that kataluma is used in the New Testament is Mark 14:14 where Jesus instructs his disciples to prepare the ‘upper room’ (kataluma); the room where Jesus planned to celebrate Passover with his disciples before his death.

In Luke’s telling we are given the impression that because of the mass of people in Bethlehem due to the Roman Census, there was no physical space for Mary and Joseph. But we also know that this was a small town with conservative values, and Mary’s condition would have been a shameful one. It could be argued that no one opened their room to them because they were being shunned due to Mary’s untimely pregnancy. Shunned they wandered desperately since the contractions were very close now. The hills around Bethlehem are dotted with caves where shepherds would take their sheep at night for protection from the elements, thieves, and predators. It is possible that when no guest room was available, a shepherd’s cave would have to do.

Our Western and modern perspective of a stable is something very different than in Mary and Joseph’s time. We tend to think of stables as structures of wood with clean and comfortable stalls and insulated walls. But the stables around Bethlehem, in all likelihood, would have been cold and dirty caves. Add to that that the shepherds were pasturing their flocks in the fields something that could only be done after harvest and before planting, which means late fall/early winter. Temperatures at that time of year can be cold, even freezing. This creates a very different scene than our Sunday school pictures of a warm and cozy barn.

This birthplace of our infant King is also striking because of what we know about Jewish law and ceremonial cleanliness. Even though agriculture was the basis of the local economy and shepherding was an important aspect of this, shepherds would have been considered unclean. Our modern storytelling rightfully gives the shepherds the respect of a ‘lead role’ in the Christmas story. Indeed, some shepherds would have been trustworthy family members, often the youngest son or daughter. But in some cases, shepherds were hired hands and would have been considered ‘low station.’ There is no evidence that the shepherds to whom the angels appeared were not good ones. But even so, the very nature of their work all shepherds were considered unclean according to Jewish law. They spent all their time outside living with animals; constantly coming into contact with excrement, carcasses, and all manner of uncleanness. Common things such as flies, bugs, spiders, mice, and rats would have rendered them in need of ceremonial cleansing. The caves where they gathered their sheep at night probably had a fair share of all of these unclean ingredients, making the very place where Jesus came into the world ... unclean. The people he came to ... unclean. His first visitors ... unclean.

THE TALKING POINTS



1 What does this tell us about God the Father?

a) There was no room for them at the inn. This might refer to the guest room, the “kataluma” being occupied, but it could also have been because of Mary’s “inappropriate” pregnancy. In a Shame/Honor culture of the 1st century Mary’s condition was a huge offense and it’s very likely that Mary & Joseph’s kinfolk shunned them because of their unseemly situation. Would you consider our culture to be a “Shame/Honor” culture? Is shunning still practiced; ever been its recipient or have you ever shunned anyone? What are some ways we’ve not made room for, or shunned, a particular person or group because of their behavior, appearance, reputation, or affiliation? Then, celebrate some ways in which we have made room and share how it ministered to others or to us.

b) Despite the fact that there was ‘no room’ for Jesus, He comes anyway. The Greek word for room: “topos” and can be translated as: no space as well as no possibility, opportunity, or even no chance. In other words Luke 2:7 might be translated “there was no chance/opportunity/possibility for the guest room.” Interesting, even when it appears there is no chance or opportunity, Jesus comes anyway! Discuss some examples from your own life or experiences where you have witnessed Jesus breaking into a life or a situation where there appeared to be no room. No possibility. No chance.

2 a) We struggled with the “earthy” nature of George’s stable teaching; i.e. Jesus born in sheep dung. What surprised you more? George sitting in a cave and announcing that it was a stable, or hearing his blunt description of it? Why might this picture of a ‘stable’ be surprising for many of us who have grown up with the Christmas story? What do we learn about God the Father given Jesus’ birthplace? What do we learn about Jesus?

b) Matthew 2:2 the Magi asked, “Where is the one who is born the King of the Jews?” Think of the behavior and images we associate with royalty. How does this stand in contrast with the way Jesus did these things and what lessons might we take from that? Consider Isaiah 53: 2-3.

3 Read Luke 2: 8-20. Some ‘hired’ shepherds had an unsavory reputation (Jesus states that the ‘hireling flees because he cares not for the sheep’), but often shepherds were the youngest sons or daughters in their family. How does this make the role and the reaction of the shepherds in the Christmas story all the more remarkable?

4 The key word in Philippians 2 is kenosis: a “self-emptying”. Not only did God surrender His own Son, Jesus allowed Himself to be surrendered for you. Allow this to shine a new light on God’s love for you. Does God call upon us to “kenosis”, empty ourselves? Discuss.

“SEE WITH YOUR EYES, HEAR WITH YOUR EARS, AND SET YOUR HEARTS ON EVERYTHING I AM GOING TO SHOW YOU, FOR THAT IS WHY YOU HAVE BEEN BROUGHT HERE. THEN TELL THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL EVERYTHING YOU SEE.” EZEKIEL 40:4

The Task



Reflect on those people in your life for whom you have neglected to make room. Maybe they have different interests or odd quirks or a reputation. Brainstorm and pray through some ways that you could make room for them. Think of people at work, at church, in your family, or in your community. Pray that the Holy Spirit would prompt you to make room for those that God has put in your life. And, in light of the fact that room can also mean “opportunity” or “chance”, think of tangible ways that you can give God opportunities to come into your life. Remember, however, that even when we don’t, He might just come anyway.

Hollywood has made a lot of money with movies in which a Prince or Princes gives up their royal status and becomes a common member of society. It is a compelling storyline. Reflect for a moment on how much stock our culture puts in appearance, possessions, and status. Isaiah 53:2 comments that the Messiah does not use appearance or status to draw people to Him. Is this important in His earthly ministry? Jesus, firstborn King of the Universe, comes in a lowly way. Hebrews 4:14-15 tells us that this is so He can identify with us; Jesus’ challenge to us is will we identify with Him? Read Matthew 25:44-45. As He was humble in coming to us, think of ways that we can be humble in coming to Him.

Max Lucado, in his book *When God Whispers Your Name* writes, “I will be overlooked before I boast. I will confess before I accuse. Nothing is won by force. I choose to be gentle.” We probably have modern day places of ‘low honor’ that might correspond with the surprising birthplace of Jesus. But what might be places of ‘low honor’ in our daily living and relationships? Not having the last word, for instance, or saying ‘I was wrong.’ Think of some ways you can be like Jesus and occupy places of low honor. How can you strive toward loving and serving others rather than dominating? Read Philippians 2: 1-8. It’s our human nature to want to be honored. We like being honored at work, in our church, and in our homes. Think about how little honor Jesus demanded during his life, starting with his humble birth. In fact, our scripture tells us that Jesus emptied Himself to give us full life. He humbled Himself despite being the King of Kings. Think of ways that you might ‘empty’ yourself for the benefit of the people around you; think especially of your family members. Sometimes those closest to us are the hardest for us to humble ourselves.

The reaction of the shepherds is a compelling part of the Christmas story. They are quick to go and see, they are overjoyed, and they are quick to ‘go and tell’. This can inspire us in our own lives when it comes to our reaction to Jesus coming into our lives. Think of some ways you can live into the reaction of these shepherds. What might it look like for you to ‘Rejoice-Go-Tell’.