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Making Room

Luke 2:7

Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus is born into a family that does not really belong in a world that worships wealth and power. They make the journey to Bethlehem to satisfy the need of the ruling class to have everyone counted so that taxes can be collected and young men can be conscripted for military service. But this journey is for them one long series of misfortunes. They have to travel at a time when Mary is expecting the birth of her first child. When the time comes for the baby to be born there are no appropriate accommodations available. This birth takes place in the dirty confines of a cattle stall. There is no place for them in the inn.

Thomas Merton has commented on the significance of Jesus' birth in a cattle stall in these words:

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it—because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it—his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons...With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.¹

This issue is explored in a 1937 movie called *Make Way for Tomorrow*. The film was a flop at the box office because it dealt with the kind of problem that Depression-era audiences went to the movies to escape. Victor Moore and Beulah Bondi play an elderly couple named Bark and Lucy who have not saved enough money for retirement. Social Security does not yet exist. Bark loses his longtime job and cannot find another. When the home they have lived in and loved all their lives goes into foreclosure, their grown children have to take them in. Since all of these children have families of their own they all insist they do not have room for both Bark and Lucy. So after 50 years of marriage they are split up and must live in different cities. When the initial living arrangements for Bark and Lucy become too inconvenient for their relatives a more extreme solution is found. Lucy will be placed in a depressing and run-down old folk's home and Bark will be shipped across the country to the daughter who lives on the West Coast.

By now you can probably understand why nobody wanted to go to this movie. The studio brass pressured the director Leo McCarey to come up with a happy ending but he refused. McCarey would not change the ending because the essence of the film for him is the way Bark and Lucy respond to the world at its worst. When Lucy learns that her daughter-in-law has maneuvered her son into placing her in the old folks' home, she is determined to spare her son the pain of turning her out. Before he can tell her the bad news she announces that the old folk's home is where she really prefers to be. He knows she is lying but is amazed by the quality of her sacrificial love.

The climactic scene of the film is a last date which Bark and Lucy have knowing it will probably be their final experience together. One reviewer describes the scene in these words:

The discomfort of their guilty children is forgotten when they visit the hotel where they spent their honeymoon fifty years before. The hat-check girl is gracious and the manager treats them to the hospitality of the hotel. Lucy has a drink, but only after seeing that other women are drinking in public now. For a couple of hours Bark and Lucy are able to communicate as sweethearts once more. What follows is one of the most touching farewells in the movies.²

Bark and Lucy experience the world at its worst; a world where there truly is no place for them. But they make the best of their tragic situation by celebrating with gratitude the fifty years they have shared together. The grace which is at the heart of their relationship draws in every stranger they meet that day.

This is the truth that Luke holds up for his readers. He takes us to the cattle stall where Mary and Joseph are making the best of a terrible situation. Here is a weary and frightened young couple who have taken a dirty, rough-hewn manger and transformed it into a soft, warm cradle. Luke believed that the grace which enabled them to place their infant in that manger has more power than all the money and armies the world will ever produce.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, "The Time of No Room," from *Watch For the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Plough Publishing House, 2001.
2. Glenn Erickson, Turner Class Movies, *Movie News*, "Leo McCarey's Make Way For Tomorrow," page 3.