

December 22, 2024

“The Perfect Place”



Luke 2:6-7

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Special Music: “Away in a Manger”

Phil Wickham

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXXpJeXCJ1w>

THE PERFECT PLACE

Donna looked about the living room. It was somewhat cozy and it definitely had the feel of a bachelor's place. While it was functional, it was obvious that old Dan Pritchard could have used a woman's touch. It wasn't that the place was unkempt, it was simply that the place felt like it had a man's presence, somewhat organized but in need of color and a good cleaning. The dust was thick, but that wasn't Dan's fault. After all, the cottage had been deserted for over five years.

The cottage had two bedrooms, a single bath, a kitchen with plenty of cabinets, a living room, and a fair amount of closet space. Unfortunately, all of the cabinets and closets still contained what remained of Dan Pritchard. There was a utility shed in the fenced back yard, and more weeds than grass because nobody had bothered to water the yard in years.

Donna was glad she didn't have to rush out and buy appliances. Everything seemed to work. There was a fridge, a stove, and a washer and dryer. She had gone by the local bargain store and picked up a mop and broom, cleaning rags and cleansers, and other things she felt she might need. The first thing on her list was to sweep and mop the floors. The floors were natural wood with a few rugs. There was no place in town to clean the rugs, but the house had an old clothesline that had never been taken down. Donna rolled up the rugs one by one, carried them out to hang them on the line. She used the broom to beat what dust she could out of them and then wet them down with the leaky water

hose. She then scrubbed the rugs with a brush she had found under the kitchen sink.

Donna was thankful that the day was on the warm side, even though it was December. The sun would help dry the rugs, assuming they were still usable after she finished cleaning them. She was thankful that Jolita Patterson over at the water department had waved her deposit so that she could get the water turned on. Donna felt that Pastor Chuck had probably encouraged her in that direction. But she did have to pay the electric deposit which made things difficult financially, though not undoable. Henry Strawberry over at the bank had set her loan up so she didn't need to start making payments for ninety days, which was a big relief. She needed a phone, but that would have to wait until she was a little more on her feet.

After cleaning the rugs, she returned to the house and began the difficult task of sweeping up years of built-up dust. Starting with the first bedroom, she realized that she probably needed to put the covers and sheets in to wash, but as soon as she pulled them back, she knew they were a lost cause as they tore under the stress. It was a good thing she was still staying at Rebel's house, so she had time to find replacements. Donna would visit Steve over at "New to You" to see what the thrift store might have in the way of bedding. The mattress seems fine so she could keep that for now. She had bought a box of large garbage bags and she started filling one with the bad sheets and covers. While she was at it, she did the second bed as well because it was in the same condition.

There was a knock at the front door, but before she could answer it, Katie Callaway and her daughters, Jackie and Brenda, let themselves in. Donna didn't mind. The Callaways were family as far as she was concerned. The girls ran and hugged Donna and, to be honest, she was glad for the attention.

"We came to help," said Katie straight out.

"Oh, you don't need to do that, but it is appreciated," responded Donna.

"Nonsense," said Katie. "Where do we start?"

"Well, there's a lot to be done," said Donna. "Tell you what, can the girls sweep and mop while you and I salvage what we can to take over to 'New to You'? I want to check over there anyway to see if they have any bedding to replace the stuff that needs to go away. Everything has to be scrubbed down, but I would like to remove whatever I can't use before we do that. I'm sure someone could get some use out of these odds and ends."

"Sounds like a plan," said Katie. "Let's get started! Girls, I need you to start sweeping and mopping the floors."

"But mom..."

"No buts. We're here to help and that's what we are going to do."

Katie and Donna headed to the master bedroom as the girls began sweeping up the dust. Donna opened the closet in the bedroom and what she found began to unsettle her. It was like Mr. Pritchard had never left. All of his clothes still hung just as he left them. There were several suits, many shirts, and

pants, all neatly hanging. It was also surprising that Dan Pritchard was a collector of ties, from basic black to whimsically colorful. Everything in the house left one with the feeling that the previous owner of the house was about to walk through the door. If it hadn't been for the layers of dust and the musty smell, the house would have felt occupied.

Katie opened one of the dresser drawers to find all of Pritchard's underwear and socks neatly folded. Everything looked like it was in decent shape, so maybe Steve Nash over at 'New to You' could find it all a new home. Donna started gathering things up and putting them in trash bags for transport. She left the suits on hangers. No reason to get them all wrinkled. A couple of them still had laundry tags on them from the last time Mr. Pritchard had taken them to be cleaned. Katie bagged up all the items in the dresser. In the bottom of the closet, Donna pulled out some tennis shoes and dress shoes as well as a pair of hunting boots. In the back of the closet, she found a nice Remington twelve-gauge pump shotgun. Donna figured she would just give that to Dusty for all his help. She had never been much of a hunter herself.

Donna and Katie carried the garbage bags and the shotgun to Katie's car. It was going to take more than one trip to Steve's store, so they didn't try to clean out the second bedroom. Having loaded the car, they walked back towards the kitchen to check on the girl's progress before heading for the store. Katie's daughter Jackie was filling up garbage bags with old food from the pantry. She had already taken what little food was in the fridge, bagged it up, and set it outside. She had found an old box of baking soda to put in the fridge to help with

the odor. Katie's other daughter, Brenda, had finished sweeping in the kitchen and was filling the sink with water and cleaner so that she could begin mopping.

"Girls," Katie said, "Donna and I are going to take a load over to Steve's shop. Will you be all right until we get back?"

"Gee, mom, I don't know," said Brenda. "Are you going to bring lunch back? We're starving!"

"Well, what do want?"

"Pizza!" both girls shouted in unison.

"Of course," said Katie. "I should have known. We'll be back in a little while."

As they were turning to leave, Donna noticed some marks on the kitchen door frame. They alternated with one side being marked at the top with the name 'Jeff' and the other side with the name 'Jonas.' Obviously, this cottage had more history than just Dan Pritchard.

"By the way, Mom," said Jackie, "I found this letter in one of the drawers in the kitchen while I was cleaning. I didn't open it and it doesn't seem to be addressed to anyone." She handed the letter to her mother, who in turn handed it to Donna.

"Your house, your mail," said Katie.

Donna opened the letter and read it through:

'Dear person reading this letter,

I just wanted to leave a little note so that you might know the legacy of this home. My husband and I bought and moved into this house after coming to Parable in 1965. For twenty-six years, this was our home. My two sons, Jeff and Jonas, were born here and grew up in Parable. This was the perfect place for us, although small with our growing family. We often thought about buying a larger place, but this home suited us, and we didn't want to leave. It grew on us. And we grew to love everything about it, including the contrary nature of the heater and the occasional groan as the house shifted a little when the seasons changed, which often caused the doors to stick.

Now my sons are grown and my dear husband, Jeff Sr., passed on last year. As much as I love this place, I am moving to Austin to live with my sister. We are both widows now and plan to take care of each other.

I do not know what will become of this home, but I pray that if you are the new owner, you will love it as much as we did. I pray that you find warmth living here, as we did. May you enjoy all the comfort and joy these walls brought to my family over all the years we lived here. I pray that you find it the perfect place, just as we did. God bless you.

Mrs. Natlie Strong.

PS: You just might find our Christmas decorations in the attic. I had no reason to take them to Austin with me.

Donna gave the letter back to Katie so that she could read it as well.

‘Darn it,’ said Donna. “I meant to bring some Kleenex with me.” She walked over to the supplies and pulled off a paper towel to wipe her eyes. She was glad that Mr. Pritchard had not destroyed the letter. It was at that moment that Donna realized that Natalie was so right. This was the perfect place for her, and even with all the work that needed to be done, she was already feeling the comfort, joy, and warmth that remained from the years of happiness that rang from its walls. Yes, this was the absolute perfect place.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

How do we know if we are where God wants us to be? I mean that seriously. It is important that we consider this question and ignore the clichés that come to mind. Everything from “I own this land” to “I’ve always lived here and I plan to die here.” It should be noted that neither one of these phrases mentions where God wants us. It’s about what we want. We choose to ignore that most of the people that we take examples from in the Bible left what they strongly believed was their home as God directed them elsewhere. God sent Cain away from the area outside of the Garden to the land of Nod. God sent Abraham out of Ur to Canaan. Noah answered God’s call and built the ark with no idea of where his family was going to wind up. God sent Joseph to Egypt to prepare for the later arrival of his father Jacob and his family. God delivered his children from Egypt as Moses moved them to the promised land. God sent Nehemiah back to Judea from Persia. God moved Jesus’ family first from Bethlehem to Egypt and then to Nazareth. God moved the Apostles all over the world to preach the gospel. And Paul, well Paul seemed to be moving around constantly on his missionary journeys, finally winding up in Rome. Our God is a God who is not a stranger to moving his people to where he needs them to be. And in every case, the people involved bend to the call from God, willingly or unwillingly. God has plans for each of us. Plans that are meant to serve his agenda for both us and the people he needs for us to serve.

And that is where the cry goes up, “What about free will?” And you would be absolutely correct. After all, Cain wasn’t told where to go, he was just forced to leave because he was being punished. Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and Nehemiah could have said ‘no’, but God can be pretty convincing and difficult to say no to if we walk in step with him and listen to the voice of the Spirit inside us. And yes, God gives us the ability to ignore that voice. Look at Jonah. He said no. God had to encourage him to reconsider because he was the only one that could do what God needed to have done.

Most of us face the problem of wanting the blessings that come with a commitment to our Heavenly Father without ever really committing. Human nature tends to make us uncommitted, Spirit-ignoring, self-serving, stiff-necked, disobedient, parasitic, opportunistic people who are greedy for a reward without doing the work. And that is a very hard truth to swallow.

After all, we are often taught by the church ‘once saved, always saved’, and if that is true then ‘Why do the work? Won’t the reward be the same whether we do the work or not?’ We will give our money when we have it, help out at the food bank once in a while, give some money to the guy on the street corner, sing in the choir, serve on the church board, maybe even teach Sunday school. But when it comes to the really hard decisions, we all seem to turn off our hearing aids. It is in those hard decision moments that the rubber meets the road; when our commitment becomes more than just some feeling of obligation. It means the difference between answering God’s call enthusiastically or begrudgingly. It is those moments when we learn what dying to self really means. Those moments

when we hear the voice and don't hesitate to do what God is telling us to do, even if it is a challenge or takes sacrifice.

So yes, on the word of an angel, Joseph takes his prominently pregnant fiancé, puts her on a donkey, and heads from Nazareth to Bethlehem, knowing that family, friends, and passers-by might consider him crazy and foolish. So yes, on the words of an angel, Mary, knowing that her time to give birth was close at hand, lets Joseph, her fiancé, put her on a donkey and lead her to Bethlehem. And in spite of the angel's messages, neither of them truly knows what to expect other than God needs them in Bethlehem. Do we really believe that Mary and Joseph were looking forward to this trip? Wouldn't it have been so much easier for them to just ignore the angels and stay in Nazareth, near friends, family, and help?

But they knew this was the way it had to be. This is what God expected of them. Don't you know they had doubts when they couldn't find a place to stay in Bethlehem? Don't you think they had doubts when the only available place was a barn with only a manger to lay the newborn child in? Don't you think they had doubts when the shepherds and the townspeople arrived to peek in at the new family? But don't you know, this is how it was meant to be? This was the absolute perfect place for them to be. It was the place where God needed for them to be. This was the perfect place to pivot the world's understanding of grace, mercy, and love. This was the perfect place for the savior of the world to be born. Not some magnificent palace for a prince, but definitely the palace of a servant king.

In our story, Donna was never aware of the significance of the events that led her to that little cottage in Parable, Texas. But as she learned the significance of the home she found herself in, she was able to embrace the warmth and wonder that made that cottage a home. The intertwined stories of Dan Pritchard and Natalie Strong helped remind her that the cottage was so much more than a building of wood and nails. It was a container for history and memories, warmth and comfort.

Mary must have felt the same way, cuddled up in that barn to stay warm, holding her newborn baby. What everyone else perceived as just a breezy, unkempt place to keep animals, not fit for human habitation, was actually the palace of a King, the Servant King for a world desperate for salvation. Desperate for redemption. Desperate for deliverance. Desperately seeking the awaited Messiah who would free them from captivity and the cages of their sin.

Miracles can happen when we step into the plans God has prepared for us. Blessings rain down on us when we choose the path he has laid before us. From an earthly standpoint, that path may seem difficult, even impossible. But it is on that path we find ourselves walking with our savior, talking with our savior, just like the men on the road to Emmaus. It is on that path that Mary sings praises and thanks to God. It is on that path that we find our joy, just as we find Paul singing hymns at the top of his voice, chained to a prison wall.

That road is our perfect place, not the buildings we inhabit. That road is where we find and grow our relationship with Jesus our savior and deliverer.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

God bless you all!

AMEN

Copyright © 2024 Rev. Walt Wellborn

Scripture references provided under copyright by:

**THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION©, NIV© Copyright © 1973,
1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. © Used by permission. All rights reserved
worldwide.**