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In 1954, psychologist Muzafer Sherif brought 22 eleven-year-old boys to a summer camp in Oklahoma. Split into two groups, they quickly formed identities, rules, and strong bonds. When competition was introduced, hostility followed. But when the boys had to solve problems together, cooperation replaced conflict. By the end, they chose to travel home together. The boys didn't change—what changed was their sense of belonging.

Tonight can be full of mixed emotions.

If you have children at home, you might feed off the energy and excitement that has been building for Christmas to come.

you might feel joy, grateful for moments of love, laughter, and light that reminds you of God's goodness;
you might be tired, carrying the weight of long days, responsibilities, or grief that has quietly accumulated;
you might be lonely, aware of empty chairs, strained relationships, or the absence of someone deeply missed;
you might be hopeful, holding onto the promise that God is still at work, bringing new life, healing, and peace even now.

Christmas has a way of bringing our hearts to the surface.

Tonight's story is for all of us—it's a story about belonging. We've been spending some time in the book of Ruth. Not a typical Advent story, but it echoes the Christmas story. Ruth was not from Israel and had no wealth, status, or security. She arrived in Bethlehem—the same town where Jesus would one day be born—as an outsider, alongside her mother-in-law Naomi, after losing her husband and nearly everything she knew. Naomi tells Ruth she is free to go back to her old life, she doesn't have to follow her but Ruth says, Ruth 1:16 “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Ruth came with nothing but love and a fragile hope that God might still have a future for her. She is exactly the kind of person Christmas speaks to—someone wondering if there is still a place for them.

Ruth's story reminds us of this: God sees those who feel forgotten. He welcomes those who come with empty hands and think they don't belong. And at the end of Ruth's story, something surprising happens.

Naomi and Ruth travel back to Naomi's homeland of Bethlehem with so much loss. They had nothing left, but love. But this love was enough, love for each other, and the love of God. They didn't know that God was part of their

story the entire time.

They take courageous steps toward a future that seemed closed to them. God often works through moments where someone dares to trust, and someone else chooses to be faithful. We witness the redemption of Ruth and Naomi, significant sacrifice from Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer. But Boaz loved Ruth, and he was willing to take on the sacrifice. The book of Ruth is, at its heart, a love story: the story of a kinsman-redeemer who rescued his beloved from a desperate situation at great personal cost.

They marry, and have a child together. They name him Obed; who becomes the father of Jesse, the father of David.” The child placed in Naomi’s arms is more than a grandson; he is a sign that God has been at work all along, turning bitterness into joy and restoring hope where it seemed gone. What once felt like an ending is revealed to be a beginning.

Tonight we are standing between promise and fulfillment. We gather at the manger, at the edge of it—like Naomi, holding a gift that hints at something far greater than she could imagine. Trust that God is still placing hope into empty arms, still bringing life out of loss, and still fulfilling His promises in ways far beyond what we expect. The child in Naomi’s arms pointed us forward to the Child in the manger, Jesus,—Our Redeemer who comes not loudly or forcefully, but gently, faithfully, and full of grace.

God takes an outsider, Ruth, and places her right into the family line of Jesus. And generations later, we read about it in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew *begins* his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus—and Ruth's name is right in the middle of it. Why? Because Matthew wants the world to see that Jesus did not come from a sanitized lineage.

He came from foreigners, outsiders, pain, and brokenness. Jesus' family tree is a story of God redeeming the unlikely. We often cannot see how God is weaving redemption through our own losses and longings. Yet the book of Ruth reminds us that God is always writing a bigger story—one that leads, ultimately, to Christ.

That truth shines even more brightly when we remember how Jesus Himself entered the world. As Luke tells us in Luke 2:1–7 “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands

of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

When we look to the birth of Jesus, He was born in Bethlehem from Ruth’s faithfulness. Through Ruth’s faithful decision to follow her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem, God set in motion a story of redemption, God’s greater plan to bring the Savior into the world—and Jesus’ birth says something we need to hear:

In God’s family, there is room for you.
Not because you’ve done everything right.
Not because your life is tidy.
Not because you’ve got faith all figured out.

There’s room for you because Jesus came for people just like Ruth—people who need hope, a fresh start, and a place to belong.

By travelling to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph found no place for Jesus to be born. The Son of God was born not in a room made ready, not in a great castle, but in a borrowed space, among animals, because the world had no room for Him. And that same Jesus, once laid in a manger because there was no room, would later say in John 14:2 “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?”

What irony! No room for Jesus at the inn, yet He came to

make room for us. He entered a world that shut its doors, so He could open the door to belonging, grace, and new life. This is the Christmas story: If the world has no room for you, God does. The child born with no place at the inn is the Savior who makes a place for the weary, the broken, the uncertain, and the hopeful. There is always room.

As Luke continues, Luke 2:8–14 “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!””

When the angels declare the good news, they say the good news of great joy is for all people. The angels appear in the fields, not in palaces, showcasing that God comes to where we are. The announcement is made to the shepherds — outsiders in their society. Belonging begins with Christ, for to you is born this day a Savior.

So, come to Jesus as you are.

Just as Ruth was woven into the family of the Messiah, Christ invites us into His family.

Christmas is not the story of perfect people finding God. It's the story of God coming to imperfect people and saying *You belong. You matter. And you are loved.*

I'm going to end by telling you a true story from Christmas Eve in 1914 - in the trenches of World War I. Soldiers on opposite sides of the war sat in freezing, muddy trenches. They had been taught to see each other as enemies—as monsters. They were far from home, filled with fear, grief, and exhaustion. Many of them felt forgotten.

And then, in the darkness, a German soldier began to sing "*Stille Nacht.*"

Across No Man's Land, a British soldier recognized the melody and joined in.

Soon, voices from the Germans, British, and French were singing the same song—Silent Night.

For one night, weapons were lowered. Men stepped out of the trenches. Enemies shook hands. They shared food, told stories, played football, and remembered that they were human—that they belonged to something bigger than the war. The war didn't end. But for one holy night, peace broke through.

That is what Christmas does.

Jesus was born with no room at the inn, yet came to make room for us.

God entered a broken world to remind us we are not forgotten or alone.

Sherif's experiment shows how deeply we long to belong; Christmas reveals this truth more fully. God did not leave us divided, but came near in Jesus, offering a new belonging built on grace, not fear. Like the soldiers on that first Christmas Eve, we come with mixed emotions, yet Christmas still whispers: You belong. Peace is possible. God is near.

So as we sing *Silent Night* together, we are not just remembering a song from history. We are joining our voices with generations who have sung it in darkness, longing for light. Sing it as a prayer, a declaration of peace, a reminder that even in the most unlikely places—and in the most fragile hearts—God still shows up and makes room. Long before the manger, God promised a light, a home, and a presence for those who felt they didn't belong. On Christmas Eve, we remember that in Jesus, God makes room for everyone —- and invites us to do the same.