Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



A donkey and his friends assist Joseph and Mary in the 2017 animated film "The Star." (Courtesy of Sony Pictures Animation)



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On the Sunday before Christmas, the priest at my parent's church in Akron, Ohio, talked about Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. He wondered about what it sounded like when they were told there was "no room at the inn." Just before Christmas I was watching the movie "The Star" with my classes. This movie tells the nativity story told from the viewpoint of the animals. So I saw the part about there being no room for Mary and Joseph four times! I really began to think about the words "there is no room."

In my mind, I could still hear the priest wondering about what that phrase sounded like to Joseph and Mary. Often we can tell by the sound of someone's voice if they are really sorry that they can't help us, or if they are just trying to get rid of us. Were Mary and Joseph greeted with sincere apologies, or were the people at the inn haggard and in a hurry, and just brushed them off quickly?

There are many different levels of seclusion for different groups of people in our society. The homeless, people living with mental illness or disabilities, refugees, asylum seekers, people of color, the LBGTQ+ community: What do the words "no room for you" sound and look like to these people? We are moving toward a more open, inclusive society, but we are not there yet.

Do people who are often left out hear words of welcome that are not really welcoming? Do they hear voices that say, "Come in," but know they are not really wanted? I began to wonder what this really sounds and feels like.

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I heard about a group of people who collected donations for refugees. They were expecting the money to go to refugees from a particular place — but the donations ended up going to a different group of refugees from another place. The organizers wondered if people would be upset. After all, we are human beings, and we can put conditions on our kindness and on our giving.

Next I wondered about the places in in my life where I might say, "There is no room." (I always end up with more questions than answers!) The following questions came quickly. Do I say *no* to letting God in by saying *I don't have time*? Do I say *there is no room* to do the right thing? Do I push away the people closest to me?

I am generally a good person. I care about my students. I help others when I know there is a need. However, I can think of people, times and places where I have had no room for others. I can identify one particular situation in which I often have no room for others. It happens when I can tell a person's political views are different from mine. I am sure these people can hear in my voice that I don't have room for their views or their way of thinking. I often hear the same in theirs. I am guessing that most of us can think of the people we don't have room for.

In the movie "The Star," Ruth the sheep needs help to save Mary. Ruth comes upon a flock of sheep and says, "That looks like my flock" and realizes with relief that it is, indeed, her flock. But she says in a frustrated voice, "Isn't there anyone else?"

There isn't anyone else, but the other sheep end up helping her to save Mary and Jesus. The people around us are the ones we have: the people we work with, the friends we choose, the relatives we don't choose.

Two of the meanest characters in th**e** movie are the two dogs who--with their owner--are after Mary, Joseph and, ultimately, Jesus. Then the dogs are saved by the good animals from falling off a cliff. Realizing that they have been saved from death, Rufus asks the other dog, Thaddeus, "Are we going to be good dogs now?" Thaddeus agrees, saying, "We have to try."

At the very end, when Jesus is in the manger, Rufus asks again if they are good dogs, and Thaddeus says, "We have to keep trying."

As each of us welcomes in the New Year after celebrating the birth of Jesus, it can be a time for us to reevaluate and find the places in our lives where we can open up room for God and others. We can easily forget that God does not put conditions on loving us. All God asks of us is that we try. The end of the old year and the beginning of a new year is the perfect time to remember the best gift we received this Christmas: the love God has given to each of us. We can try to love others and make room for others, the way God has room for us.