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## **Homelessness: A look at the life of Jesus**

Homelessness is a situation fraught with physical, emotional, and social difficulties. A growing, worldwide problem crossing all boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, and creed, homelessness is a challenge to all of society. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to homelessness, continues to make a complicated problem more difficult. Why does society view those without a stable home in such a negative light? Does having a home make a person more valuable or worthwhile? This author would like to challenge that view with a look at homelessness in the life of Jesus Christ.

Born in a temporary shelter, Jesus can identify with the homeless of today. The family of our Lord faced the same situation that many homeless families face, not enough beds for the number of people in town. A June 16<sup>th</sup> press release from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (Netburn, 2005) reports 91,000 homeless

individuals in Los Angeles County every night (p. 1). Because of the census for tax purposes required by the Roman Caesar of that era (TEV, Luke 2:1 & 2), the same situation regarding a lack of housing existed in Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. Joseph was required by law to leave the family home in Nazareth and take his wife, who was nearing the end of her pregnancy, to his original hometown of Bethlehem, an unexpected journey that thousands of others were also making (Luke 2:3).

While the innkeeper of the little town is sometimes vilified for not providing a room in his inn for this desperate family, he did provide temporary shelter for the Holy Family (Luke 2:7). A stable with clean straw was certainly better than no shelter at all for a pregnant woman in active labor. Perhaps Joseph had taken the last part of the journey a little more slowly because of Mary's condition; that part of the story is unknown. What we do know is that he tried to find a place for her to give birth, and the innkeeper provided temporary shelter for this homeless family where there was a roof over their heads and a little privacy from prying eyes while the Savior of humankind made His entrance into the world (Luke 2: 16).

Joseph had a trade, carpentry, that was portable and useful; so he was able very shortly after the birth to find transitional housing for his wife and newborn foster Son (Matthew 2:11). Not long after Jesus' birth, Magi came to give honor to this special Child, a circumstance that led to His birthplace being identified by the political leaders of the day (Matthew 2:3-8). Joseph, whose connection with God was intact and intimate, received word that he needed to protect the life of his foster Son by leaving the area immediately (Matthew 2:13). Fleeing from violence is also something that enables Jesus to identify with the homeless of today. In the middle of the night, the Holy Family left

their transitional housing in Bethlehem and fled to Egypt, an area not under the domination of Herod, the political power over the Middle East (Matthew 2:14-15). Again, they were in a transitional state. Though the Bible is not clear about what type of housing the family of Jesus had in Egypt, they were there only a few years before making the long journey back to Galilee and Mary's hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-20). Camping out along the way is another experience that the homeless and Jesus share.

Little is written of the intervening years, but we know from Scripture that Jesus grew up in a stable home, visited Jerusalem at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41, 51-52), and apprenticed and worked as a carpenter from His majority, at around age 13, to about age 30 when His life situation changed dramatically (Luke 3:22-23). For three years, Jesus was again homeless as He took up His calling to teach the people and heal the sick (Mark 6:6), and to preach the good news of the kingdom (Isaiah 61:1-2). Jesus and His close followers spent three years moving from place to place, using temporary housing, while He carried out His ministry (Luke 4:16-42). When asked where He lived, His response was "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). The homeless of today can identify with these words. With the fracturing of families and the tearing of the familial fabric of society today, it is a common sight to find individuals, women, children, and entire families with no place to lay their heads.

Jesus chose the life of an itinerant preacher/healer, and most of the homeless of today do not choose this life; however, the end result is the same, no stable income, housing, or food. Many people, among them several women, helped Jesus by providing food and shelter along the way (Luke 8:1-3). Still, Jesus had no permanent home from

the time He turned over His family carpentry business and became an itinerate preacher. Until His death on the cross, Jesus had no stable housing, no regular place to sleep, and no regular meals. In fact, even in death, He had no place of His own; He was laid in a borrowed tomb for three days until His resurrection on Easter morning (Matthew 27:60). Would we have treated Jesus as a guest or an unwanted burden had He lived in our day?

What is our response as a Church to this age-old dilemma? There are many places in the Old Testament that remind us to provide for the poor and needy (Jeremiah 22 & 23). We are told that a lifestyle of hospitality to the extreme poor is close to God's heart and will draw us into greater intimacy with Yahweh (Deuteronomy 10, Psalms 112). Yahweh spoke through the prophet Isaiah as He admonished His people to "Share your food with the Hungry and open your homes to the homeless" (58:7). The New Testament echoes this theme through the letters of the Apostles (Romans 12:13). In the book of Acts the story is told of Spirit-filled leaders being appointed to care for the poor and needy (6:1-7). The followers of the Way were encouraged to be advocates for those unable to fend for themselves and to provide homes for the homeless (John 13 - 15; Hebrews 12:10-13; I Peter 2:12-15, 3:8, 4:8-9, 5:2).

Jesus went to His own and they did not receive Him (John 1:10-11). He was rejected, as many of the homeless are rejected and marginalized by society (Baumann & Grigsby, 1998). Walter Brueggemann, a Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, reminds us that the Biblical model is to engage in the "Practice of Homefulness" (Church & Society, 2001, p. 10) by reaching out as a body of believers and as individuals to those in need. He believes that

providing food, clothing, and housing for the homeless is an “ethical imperative” (p. 13). In this way, God is made visible through social practice.

Jesus understands the plight of the homeless and is able to identify with them and to enter into their pain. He was born in a shelter, lived in transitional housing, fled from violence, lived in temporary housing, camped out along the road, and lived as an itinerant worker at the mercy of those who serve others. As we seek to identify with the Lord Jesus Christ, it is important that we learn to see the poor and destitute through His eyes and respond to them in the way that He would have us respond, to love a stranger as God does. That is the mandate of the Christ-follower (John 14:14, 15:20; Galatians 5:9; I John 4). Let us receive and embrace those who are poor, needy, and homeless; let us echo the words of Jesus who called those who are weak and burdened to come and receive rest (Matthew 11:28).

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**Shameful**

*It is shameful  
To feed the hungry  
And not fight hunger  
It is shameful  
To shelter the homeless  
And not advocate for affordable housing  
It is shameful  
To visit the prisoner  
And not mandate liberty to captives  
It is shameful  
To visit the sick  
And not raise hell with Grady's policies to charge the poorest of the poor  
It is shameful  
To go to church  
And not struggle on behalf of the poor and oppressed  
It is shameful  
To have money in the bank  
And not build a society where the necessities of life are a human right.*

By Ed Loring (2000)