



# Links Players

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## O Little Town of Bethlehem

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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. Luke 2:6-7 NIV*

The Nike swoosh wobbled on edge. The announcers and viewers froze in disbelief until the ball slowly toppled into the cup. And then the world went wild. Tiger's famous chip on hole 16 at the 2005 Masters is legendary. Thanks to video and the internet, it's available for all to witness in exact detail.

When reading the Gospel of Luke, we are not privy to a play-by-play reel. Many facts are present, but Luke leaves out particularities that first-century readers would have known. Over the centuries, some details surrounding the Christmas story have become inaccurate. The overarching storyline remains true – Jesus was born in poor and humble circumstances, but other nuances of the story need our attention.

Let's consider three questions. Why Bethlehem? Did Joseph and Mary receive hostility or hospitality? Why was there no room in the guest room (inn in many translations)?

Bethlehem. Joseph returned to Bethlehem to be registered for Caesar's decree because he was of "the house and lineage of David (Luke 2:4 ESV)." Mary also had family ties through her relative Elizabeth, whom she had spent time with immediately after learning she was with child. The prophet Micah said this about Bethlehem, "from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:2 ESV)."

Hostility or Hospitality. It is commonly viewed that Mary and Joseph were shunned when they arrived in Bethlehem. In the first-century Middle East (and still today), mandatory hospitality was the norm. This equals protection and provision (even to strangers) with no questions asked. Regardless of the circumstances, scholars believe that Mary and Joseph would have been welcomed and shown hospitality, not hostility. Likewise, throughout the world, women about to give birth are assisted and given special attention.

Guest Room. Luke uses the Greek word *kataluma*, defined as "guest room, guest chamber, upper room." It is not a lodge or hotel. Small homes typically included an upper room or a room in the back for guests. Two possibilities as to why Mary and Joseph didn't get the room are: other guests were already using the room, or it was not an appropriate place to give birth in case something went wrong.

Mary and Joseph didn't come into Bethlehem in a rush (probably not on a donkey either), "And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth" (Luke 2:6). They had time to prepare a place for her to give birth. A family stable was often inside the home – in the front or lower level. Since the shepherds were in the fields, the stable was available and made a reasonable place.

Unlike the details of Tiger's chip, we can't replay the Christmas story verbatim. What we can do is revisit the scene with fresh eyes and welcome Jesus' birth story with renewed wonder and awe.

**Prayer – Lord, help us today to understand the Christmas story with eyes and hearts full of wonder.**

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Tracy Hanson

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