

## Finding our Home

*The following sermon was preached by the Rev. Richard H. Winters at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Indianapolis, on Christmas Eve 2006.*

I could begin this Christmas Eve sermon by apologizing for the space in which we gather—it's not really a church, and as hard as we've tried, it doesn't exactly evoke the beauty of Christmases past. I could begin this sermon by thanking you for being here when you could have chosen to observe this holy night in a real church building. But I think it better *not* to apologize, because, as I think about it, being displaced to this humble Parish Hall due to the Church Building expansion project has resulted in our receiving an unexpected gift—and that is the gift of being able to more readily identify with the beautiful humility and simplicity of God's loving initiative to bring us home, which is one of the messages of Christmas: God became one of us in order to bring us home.

Home: it's an interesting image for us to contemplate. Mary and Joseph had left their home in Nazareth in order to perform a *civic* duty: to be registered for the Roman census at Joseph's ancestral home, Bethlehem, the city of David. We—the people of St. Paul's—have left our church home in order to perform a *missional* duty: to renovate our church building such that it speaks Christian hospitality and welcome in a way that it never has before; to increase our seating capacity so that there is more “room in the inn;” to enhance our worship environment in all sorts of ways reaching its pinnacle in the blue tones of a high vaulted ceiling representing the far reaches of the divine, moving us to proclaim as did the angels of long ago: “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace, goodwill among people.” So for the mission of sharing the transforming power of God's love in Christ more effectively and with more people, we've left home.

While away from home, Mary and Joseph sought temporary lodging as we have done. For them, however, even that eluded them. Overcrowding in the city meant that there was no room in the inn and no guest room to be found, only a place meant to shelter domesticated animals.

Traditionally, this fact has been interpreted to foreshadow that there would prove to be no room in the world for Christ except on the cross. As John's gospel puts it, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” So, yes, most certainly, there is this foreshadowing: the Christ Child, having begun his life resting in a wooden manger—no place really for a newborn to be—points to the rejection of Christ, culminating in Jesus being nailed to a wooden cross.

But to me, the cross of Jesus—from which he continued to love us even in the face of betrayal and rejection—casts not a shadow on the nativity but a bright light, for from the cross issues Resurrection Light, illuminating the gospel truth that God's loving purposes will not be thwarted by an inhospitable world, that God needs only the most simple and plain of places in which to find a home, to birth new hope, new life for the world, for you and for me.

So, yes, this place here tonight is a gift, for its simplicity enables us to hear afresh the good news that ultimately God's home is not a place—not even a glorious building dedicated to God's honor—no, ultimately, God's home is the humble human heart yearning for the companionship that only God can satisfy. So, yes, this place here tonight is enough for us to realize as we commune together in the fellowship of Christ's Church, that in our heart of hearts the home we really seek is with God, whose Son Jesus welcomes us with open arms, shelters us with his grace, and who, day by day, nourishes us with the sustenance of his own life.

Merry Christmas.

*Amen.*