

## CHRISTMAS DAY, 2018

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

It's always great to have family “home for the holidays,” to give gifts, catch up on each other's lives, eat some wonderful meals together and reminisce about the past. “Home” for us and for our children means a place of belonging; a place of nurture and encouragement; a refuge in times of transition or struggle. On the other hand, due to human sin and brokenness, “home” to many is not always what God intended. It can become a lonely place, a place of lost hopes and dreams, even a place of conflict and hatred and, yes, brutal crimes.

The gift of the Christmas story comes once again to our homes and widens our sense of family. “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” The blessing of Christmas is that it opens our eyes to a much larger family, God's family—people not related by blood but linked together through the power of baptism and their faith in the Lord Jesus. If Christmas is a lonely time for you, with or without family; if it is a time of intense sharing and joy or of deepening sorrow and regret, you are not alone. You are not without a home. God's family is our home, our joy, a place of acceptance and hope.

Isn't it a bit ironic that as the family of God gathers to worship on Christmas morning, we come to hold and receive into our hearts a child who is homeless? We probably don't give it much thought. We've painted the story of this birth with such a warm glow. It has become magical, with congregations across the world lighting millions of candles and singing, “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.” The truth of the matter, is that it was dark and damp and lonely in that hillside cave.

There was no chorus of angels singing to Mary and Joseph, “Glory to God in the highest.” This family had been on the road a long time; they were turned away from relatives' homes and given a stable-cave as a place of last resort. Who knows what resources they had or where their next meals were coming from? It was as if they found themselves in a tent city of homeless folks outside a border crossing!

The gospel makes it clear that Jesus was homeless in two ways. St. John relates that he really was the Word, through whom all creation came into being. Jesus left the glory of his Father, the dwelling of God on high, to be born a human.

In the Mass in B Minor, Bach sets the phrase of the creed, “And became man,” with a solemn descending series of skips in every voice part, over a constant undulating bass. You get the feeling of how treacherous a moment this was for Jesus as he left the Father. The strings in this movement play a cross-shaped melody suggesting that when Jesus left his Father, it would all end in death. So first, Jesus, the Word, left his heavenly home in a selfless act. And then, second, as a human child, Jesus finds himself homeless again, born to a poor young couple on the street of a tiny backward town. In a favorite Christmas hymn we sing: “From God's right hand the Son descends, is born an infant small, and lies in poverty, his bed a manger in a stall, a manger in a stall.”

In Jesus' birth we see the face of the homeless. Like him, they are not without names. The circumstances of the Holy Family parallel a homeless family in our time huddled around a pillar underneath an interstate highway. What has always been the American dream of a home for every family is a mirage. Our nation only has enough beds for one out of every four homeless people. The homeless are from surprisingly diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

Most recently a large number have been displaced through natural disasters. How do you rebuild a life that has been destroyed in seconds by a wildfire, tornado, or hurricane? What would it be like if we or our families were suddenly homeless? If we had to travel on foot a hundred miles and seek refuge in a town where there was no lodging and at a time when we had little or no resources? Mary and Joseph's predicament increases our empathy for the homeless and our resolve to help them as we are able.

In a strange twist, the gospel actually encourages us to be homeless too. Jesus, as he walked the roads of Palestine on his mission to bring God's kingdom, had nowhere to lay his head. He was an itinerant preacher and he expected his followers to travel down that same path. He told us to travel light, to take only a backpack, to move with quick and sure feet in sharing the good news of God's salvation. He certainly didn't expect us to hunker down and enjoy the good life in beautiful homes without sacrificing ourselves for others and walking the same road as he did. Even on Christmas morning, especially on Christmas morning, it's good for us to hear his invitation to take up the cross and follow him; never to get comfortable, but to be people on the move.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

I'll never forget Father Carl Weidmann, professor of my first year Greek class in college, taking us word by word through the Gospel of John. It was like a rite of passage for every pre-theological student.

When he came to the Greek word "dwelt" in John 1:14, Father Weidman's eyes opened wide, lit up, and then he became animated and spilled out the real meaning of the Greek text:

"The Word tented among us; God pitched a tent among us, God pitched a tent right in our front yard. He didn't live in a house; he pitched a tent. He was on the move!"

God was born to a homeless couple in a cave. Jesus experienced life as a refugee with Mary and Joseph in Egypt to relive his people's slavery and their wanderings. He lived the life of a homeless teacher. He did that in order to bring us the most wonderful news of all. This news touches God's children who live on the streets of our cities or at the border of our country or those whose homes have been destroyed by disaster.

This news cuts across the great divides of culture and status and wealth and brings a sense of dignity and hope to every human being. This news makes us animated in our faith and excited to share the Gospel.

This is the Good News: Jesus finds his home in us wherever we "tent." He dwells in us as we remember our heavenly birth through baptism and that incredible promise that our home is really in heaven; that, here on earth, as God's family, we are to be about caring for each other and our neighbor.

Jesus pitches his tent next to us at this table where he feeds us with his presence and tells us that we are loved; that there is hope for what we are facing; that we are forgiven for messing things up. God makes a home in us as we carry Jesus' loving presence to those in need near and far.

God has come to dwell in you! In your heart, in your life, make a manger for him—the Word made flesh, the Son of Mary. I promise that if you receive him as the greatest gift of all, you will feel right at home!

They say, “home is where the heart is!” The Christmas gospel says much the same thing. If we open wide our heart to receive the Christ Child, we will be at home. As Jesus said himself, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart [and we may add] your home be also.” [Mt. 6:21]

A blessed Christmas to each of you and your family! God's richest blessings in the days to come as you welcome Pastor Lauren into the home of God's family here at Muhlenberg! It has been a joy to serve you these past sixteen months, but the Lord has said, “Paul, it's time to hit the road!” Or in the words of our last carol, “Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!” Will you join me on the road and bring the good news of salvation to others?