

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Eve of the Incarnation, Luke 2

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Merry Christmas, Trinity Church!

In the birth of Jesus Christ, God makes home with us.

*In the birth of Jesus Christ, God makes us family,
Invites us to come home – to be at home –
and to share in homemaking on behalf of our brothers and sisters,
mothers and fathers, sons and daughters,
throughout the world.*

In the birth of Jesus Christ, God makes home with us.

At my Shreveport, Louisiana high school, when one wanted to know where a classmate lived, one inquired, “Where you staying?” ... “*Where you staying?*” As much as the question implied the interlocuter’s impermanence, the query also assumed the inquisitor’s itinerance. That is, neither party in the conversation imagined life as anything other than a series of temporary arrangements: “My address is where I am staying now, but it is not my *home*. I may not be there tomorrow, much less next month or next year.” In that teenaged social economy, then, there was generosity in this exchange, for we did not force one another to confess our upheavals.

In my own life, I was fortunate to have had a different experience of *home*, an understanding physically rooted in my paternal grandparents’ simple, ranch-style house on Bayou DeSiard in Monroe, Louisiana.

We called my grandfather, “Sir” – a needling homage to his protest of his children’s impolite response to him: “Susan! Tim! Steve!” he would call. “Huh?” or “What?” they would answer, prompting his quick retort: “Don’t ‘*What*’ me, it’s ‘*Sir*.’” And so he was.

My grandmother, Virginia Mae Stephens Allen, we called, “Gina.” My son and I both inherit our middle name from her, and my wife and I named our daughter for her. My grandparents raised their five children in that house they built in 1954, and, in my lifetime, my family referred to it exclusively as “Gina’s-and-Sir’s.” And at Gina’s-and-Sir’s – Lord, have mercy! – I knew I was loved.

We always entered Gina’s-and-Sir’s through their carport’s noisy screen door: *creeeeeak, snap!*, as it opened ... *creeeeeak, snap!*, as it closed. So abiding in my memory is its sound, I still hear it, not only when I intentionally conjure it, but in my sleep, man ... I hear it in my dreams. See, of all the clanging and kerplunking, of all the glurping and guffawing, of all the clicking and crunching in this world, the sound of that screen door is for me the very sound of *home*: welcome in its *creeeeeaking*, love in its *snapping*.

The Incarnation realizes the ancient Jewish belief that God dwells in the midst of God's people in this life and, for us as Christians, even into the next. To symbolize God's presence among them, ancient Jews carried the tablets of the Law in their wanderings. Later Jewish thought located God in the Jerusalem temple, and the faithful would make pilgrimages every year to offer prayer within those sacred walls. Jesus' birth harkens back to the older tradition: God has no particular house, rather God makes *home* wherever God's people are, and we gather tonight to receive that promise.

"Sir" died just before Christmas in 1997, and, on the morning of Christmas Eve, we celebrated his life at Saint Paul's Methodist Church there in Monroe. My grandmother would remain in "Gina's-and-Sir's" until she died more than ten years later.

After her death, my family moved slowly to sell the house. Though my father and his siblings blamed the delayed sale on the condition of Monroe's real estate market, none of us complained too much about delaying our goodbye to that parcel of earth. In the time between the listing and the sale, my father, aunts, uncles, cousins, and I, all found excuses to spend one more night or two within its familiar walls: "Well, I probably ought to go check on it, and make sure none of yall left the water running," we said to one another.

Creeeeeek, snap!, as we came *home* one last time.

In the same season that Gina's-and-Sir's sold, we grandchildren were making our independent lives, some of us in far-flung places. Since that time, my family has experienced a place-lessness and a loss of identity: where do we have Christmas now? Where will we spend time together? Without Gina's-and-Sir's, who are we? Where is *home*?

Those of us assured of a roof over our heads when we leave worship tonight must be careful when speaking of a "spiritual" homelessness, for some of our brothers and sisters have no such assurance. Mindful of – and, I pray, responsive to – our neighbors' suffering, neither let us underestimate the disorientation any of us experience when we lose our life's constants: the death of someone who loved us well; the loss of a holy place, a place of welcome and safety; the loss of a dear friend; the loss of a vocation, even a job. "*I want to go home!*" our hearts beg.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child..."ⁱ

In the Nativity, God welcomes Mary and Joseph as the Holy Family and charges the young couple to become homemakers for Welcome and Love. Though they have no house – not even a room above the local bar – Mary and Joseph consent, and **they make *home* where they are**. Mary and Joseph do not choose the manger, the manger chooses them “*because there was no room for them in the inn,*” and so they did what could be done for a crib; they wrapped their newborn son in what swaddling they had to warm him; they stayed near one another; and they gave thanks to God. And as they made *home* for God, God made *home* with them.

Friends, this is our family story – not mine, not yours ... *ours* – the one we heard as children, and the one we tell as we grow older. And the romancing of this tale – the retelling of it in a room this glorious ... among a company this numerous ... in a worship this wondrous – the romancing of this tale is our homemaking with God, and, if we would consent, with one another. When we recount the Nativity, we make *home* again, and we reorient ourselves to matters of consequence: to the God whose promises we too easily forget, to the family whose welcome and love we too often underestimate.

For most of my life, no matter how much time had passed – where I had been, or what I had done – I could orient myself to that familiar, Louisiana entry. And when Ginna heard me coming – *creeeeeak, snap!* – I knew that before I could reach for the wooden door behind the screen, she would beat me to its knob. At this time of year she would be standing there, vested in her Christmas apronⁱⁱ, arms outstretched, and I knew: of all the grandmothers, and all of the houses, and all of the carports and all the houses and all the grandmothers in all the world, this was mine – my *home!* – where I would always be welcomed and I would always be loved.

God still opens the door to this world, carrying Love itself across its threshold and welcoming us as family – you and me and all of us ... the very family of God! And like Mary and Joseph before even Trinity Church, we inheritors of Gabriel’s announcement offer our consent; we lean into one another; we tell the old stories; we gather in the belief – believing! – that God is here, and where God is, there is *home*. And no matter how much time has passed – where we have been and what we have done – this house of God remains *home*, where we will always know love and welcome.

Merry Christmas, friends, and may God bless you and all those you love.
Amen.

ⁱ Luke 2:1,3.

ⁱⁱ Oh, I remember the one!