

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Eve of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, 2010. To God be the glory.

A Sermon for the Eve of the Nativity

Since 2002 the Sunday New York Times Magazine has included a section called “domains.” For 2-3 pages a public figure in the arts, or literature, or politics, or somebody the Times thinks we should know, is given a series of questions about their house, their daily routine, and even about objects and physical items--all of which help readers glimpse more about the person.

Roger Ebert still owns the first typewriter he had in college. The hard-living Lucinda Williams lives in a split level in LA, and on the wall in her living room are dozens of crosses and crucifixes. She understands a thing or two about pain.

I know I should be reading the business section. And I know I'd sound a lot smarter if I referenced the week in review, but the truth is I look forward to the Styles section of the paper, and the Domains section of the Magazine. I like the quick peak into other people's homes, reading about their travel rituals, or the obsolete objects they can't part with, discovering that the things in their refrigerators are rather a lot like mine. Their domain, their homes, tell us who they are.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David.)

Think about Bethlehem for a moment. The birth we celebrate this night could have happened anywhere but, in a sense, it took place nowhere. Today Bethlehem is a Palestinian city in the middle of the ever-disputed West Bank. It has been sacked and destroyed and rebuilt through many invasions. It was said to be the birthplace of King David of old and it draws such importance as it has today as a place of pilgrimage for Christians who remember it as the place of Jesus' birth. In Luke's story of Jesus' birth it's imperative for Jesus to be of the house and lineage of the great king David. For us what's imperative is to know that Jesus was born in a specific place, but the place itself is not the key.

One of the questions I love asking people is “where are you from from?” Meaning, where did you grow up, where is that you consider home?

I imagine that some of you have traveled to be with family or friends this Christmas. Or perhaps you will be traveling later in the week. Some of you are a long way from home and others of you have come home. But I wonder how much the place you call home is really important, and whether ‘home’ is not more a state of mind.

When I think about ‘home’ it's bound up with roots and family, places of belonging and loving, and of being loved. I sometimes find myself referring to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, or even the Saint Lawrence River as ‘home’, but I'm not referring to a particular house or town as such. When I'm in Michigan or at Thousand Island Park I'm clear that Winchester is home, the place where I make my life, the place where I live. You've heard all the clichés. ‘Home is where the heart is.’ ‘Home is where they have to take you in.’ There is truth in all of them, but no cliché quite captures the fullness of what we mean when we know ourselves to be at home. The glorious act of God whose beginning we mark this night brought people to their true home.

You dear people of God: Tonight we are once again invited to put our whole trust in God's grace and love, to know ourselves to be at home. When we live in peace with justice for all, then we're at home. The promise of this night is that the way of Jesus is the way home. ‘Home’ is being comfortable in our own skin, knowing and telling the truth about ourselves because we know that we are fully known. It's not an accident that this sense of ‘home’ sounds a lot like having faith in God: the Love that made us for Love.

I listened to a book on my iPhone this year by a professor at Yale. It's entitled Disciples of All Nations, and it describes Christianity throughout the world. Among the author's many ideas is one suggesting that Christianity, of all the world's faiths, has always found itself planted in the cultural soil in which the gospel is proclaimed. Islam looks to Mecca and Medina and pretty much requires that you speak Arabic. Judaism looks to Jerusalem and Israel and pretty much requires that you learn Hebrew. Even when some have tried to insist on our looking to Rome or becoming proficient in Latin, or in our case, that we look to Canterbury and be the English Church in America, it doesn't work, at least not for very long. Our faith keeps taking shape all over the world, and it's endured as we re-tell our story in ways that make sense of it, wherever we find ourselves. The babe of Bethlehem is found wherever we are.

Tonight it's our joy and delight to relax and to savor what it means to be 'home'. The fruits of that promise are given to us wherever we find ourselves, in joy or sorrow, right here and right now.

My classmate from seminary is a chaplain at Syracuse University, and the rector of Grace Church on the edge of the campus. She and her husband have been trying to have children for six years. First on their own, and in the last two years, through adoption. It's been unspeakably exhausting and at times really, really painful. On Tuesday Jennifer emailed a bunch of us. Let me read it:

Harrison and I brought home a baby boy tonight--Timothy Aaron Baskerville Burrows. He was born on Saturday weighing 7lbs 11oz and is healthy and cute as a button. This has been quite the whirlwind--our entire world changed in just about 24 hours. I can hardly believe it all, we've waited so long, and at one point this month we weren't sure this one would work either. I had a dream last week that the UPS truck pulled up to our door with a big box. Harrison and I opened it up and there was a baby inside. And we were ecstatic. Harrison has kept asking me what I want for Christmas. I kept saying "a baby". He took me to a bike store to look at triathlon bikes. We had just left the bike store yesterday and I was on my way to pick up a Christmas tree when we got the call about our baby boy. I've been living in extended anticipation for so long, I feel like I can finally release my breath and breathe deep. For unto us a son is given--indeed.

Timothy Baskerville Burrows is at home tonight, in his domain, with his mom and dad. He won't make the New York Times Magazine, but it's no less a picture of love. So is this night. So are you. God's domain isn't just for that newborn boy in Syracuse, any more than it was just for Jesus when Mary & Joseph went back home to Nazareth. God's domain is for us all.

The babe lying in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes shall be a sign for you. Eat the bread and drink the wine; celebrate the love God has for you. It's made plain and beautiful in this birth of the one with whom we find ourselves at home.

A happy and holy Nativity you, my friends.