

Traveling Companion: Home for Christmas

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A few weeks ago, at 4 a.m. I turned on the beach for my morning bike ride. I picked my way through the darkness with a glimmer of hope from the sparse street lights. I moved onto the bike trail along the beach. The heavens put on a light show over the Gulf. The Gulf waters lashed against the naked beach as intermittent raindrops fell from a darkened sky. As I pushed on, I noticed a dark object on the path ahead. I assumed it was some debris, washed ashore by recent rains and winds. As I got closer, I was surprised to hear a young voice say, "Hi" as I began to pass. I returned the compliment. In the darkness, I noticed a slender body, lying on its stomach, prostrated on the side of the pathway with a dark blanket covering it.

I continued my ride, wondering about that young man. Was he homeless? Was he some worker who came into the area to look for work following Katrina? Was he just a free spirit, lying out under a threatening and star hungry sky? Did he have a name? A family? If he did, did his family know about him?

My mind traveled back over two thousand years to another homeless young person; a child dressed in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. He, too, was homeless, stabled under a cold December sky. Somehow, I began to see an irony and paradox, bridging the two thousand year gap.

I began to reflect on the whole concept of "home." Phrases like, "there is no place like home," "home sweet home," and "the green, green grass of home" from the famous song, kept coming to mind.

My mind journeyed to the idea Christmas is the feast of home. G. K. Chesterton expressed this reality very poignantly when he said that the Christmas stable is the place where God is homeless and all of us at home. This paradox is borne out in Matthew's gospel when he says that foxes have holes, birds have nests but he has nowhere to lay his head (Mt. 8:20) Yet, the Prologue of John's gospel reminds us that the Word became flesh and made his home among us.

Recently, I read that the word "house" has a Greek root system and translates into such concepts as "economical," and "ecological." It also contrasts with some specifically church concepts such as "ecumenical," "parochial," and "diocesan." I also find it ironic that various church organizations use the Christmas season to invite all those who may have left their home in the Catholic Church or who don't feel at home in the Church to "come home for Christmas."

I find it interesting that two very interesting words seem to have crept back into our spirituality and continue to be on the lips of committed Christian seekers. The words, "space" and "place" seem to touch a vibrant chord in a person's life. We talk about finding our own space; giving people space; not infringing on people's space; respecting people's space. We also talk about a person's place. We ask if they have found their "place" in life. We also ask if they have a sense of "place" in their lives. Obviously, God found his space and place among us so that we might find our own sense of "place" and "space" in life.

On my return journey from my bike ride, I approached the place where I encountered the "Hi" from the homeless man. He had disappeared. Obviously, he had fled into his own Egypt, just like someone did over two thousand years. Like two thousand years ago, I realized that because of One homeless person at Christmas, I discovered my own sense of "space" and "place," realizing that I, too, can be at home for Christmas.