

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE  
The Eve of the Nativity, Year A  
December 24, 2010

*YOU CAN HAVE MY ROOM!* (Luke 2:1-20)  
Howard Bowlin+

Wallace Purling was nine that year and in the second grade, although he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, Wally was well liked by the other children in his class, all of whom were smaller than he, though the boys had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally asked to play ball with them—or play any game, for that matter, in which winning was important.

Most often, they would find ways to keep him out but Wally would hang around just the same, not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, willing and smiling, and the natural protector, paradoxically, of the underdog. Sometimes, if older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who would say, “Can’t they stay? They’re no bother.”

Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play’s director, Miss Lumbard, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines, and Wally’s size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph and Mary more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large audience gathered for the town’s yearly pageant of crooks and creches, of beards and crowns, and halos and a whole stage of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time, Miss Lumbard had to make sure he didn’t wander on stage before his cue!

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly, guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door set into the stage backdrop. Wally the Doorkeeper was there waiting.

“What do you want?” demanded Wally, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

“We seek lodging,” relied the young Joseph.

“Seek it elsewhere.” Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. “The inn is filled.”

“Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very tired.”

“There is no room in this inn for you.” Wally looked properly stern.

“Please, good innkeeper, this is my wife Mary. She is about to have a baby, and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired.”

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stiff stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

“No! Begone!” the prompter whispered from the wings.

“No. Begone,” repeated Wally automatically, but with no feeling.

Joseph placed his arm around Mary, and Mary laid her head on her husband's shoulder, and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his inn, like he was supposed to, however.

Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the sad couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, and his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

And suddenly this Christmas pageant seemed different from all the others.

"Don't go, Joseph," Wally blurted out (and Miss Lumbard swooned!). "Don't go, Joseph! Bring Mary back!" And then Wallace Purling's face grew into a great big, bright, wonderful smile. And he said, "You can have my room."<sup>1</sup>

How do we respond on this night when God comes to us? Do we really have any idea about the enormous wonder and magnitude of what God has done in Jesus Christ?

Dr. John Rosen, a psychiatrist in New York City, was well known for his work with catatonic schizophrenics.<sup>2</sup> Normally psychiatrists remain separate and aloof from their patients. Dr. Rosen moved into the ward with them. He placed his bed among their beds. He lived the life they must live. Day to day, he shared it. He loved them. If they didn't talk, he didn't talk either. It was as if he understood what was happening. His being there, being with them, communicated something they hadn't experienced in years—*somebody understands*.

But then he did something else. He put his arms around them and hugged them. He held those unattractive, unlovable, sometimes incontinent persons, and loved them back into life. Often, the first words they spoke were simply, "Thank you."

This is what God did for us on that first Christmas. *He moved into the ward with us*. He placed his bed among our beds. Those who were there, who saw him, touched him and were in turn touched by him and restored to life. And they rejoiced! So too it must be for us.

If ever there is a time in the Church year when we must fully rejoice, it is during the Twelve Days of Christmas. The angels and shepherds praise God with joy. In our Church schools we sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus. We greet each other with the phrase "Merry Christmas!" Yet, many of us see little to rejoice about. There are problems, you see: bereavement, divorce, despair, poverty, winter cold, job stress, seasonal depression, and loneliness. How can people in these conditions rejoice? The readings appointed to be read at this Christmas service teach us that, while we may not be happy with world conditions or personal tragedies, we may nevertheless rejoice in the coming of the Christ who delivers us from the darkness of our world.

Henry Van Dyke has written: "Are you willing to . . . stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children; to remember the weakness and loneliness of people who are growing old; to stop asking how much your friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough;

". . . to bear in mind the things that other people have to bear in their hearts; to try to understand what those who live in the same house with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you;

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<sup>1</sup>First heard the December 1994 meeting of the Lockport, NY, Area Clergy Association.

<sup>2</sup>Mark Berg, in Donald Deffner, *Seasonal Illustrations* (San Jose: Resource Publications, 1992), 20-21.

“. . . to trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you; to make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your good thoughts, with the gate open—are you willing to do these things even for a day?

“Then you *can* keep Christmas!

“Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world—stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death—and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image of and brightness of the Eternal Love?

“Then you *can* keep Christmas!

“And if you can keep it for a day, why not always? *But you can never keep it alone!*”<sup>3</sup>

“You can have my room.” Let that be your joyful response to Joseph and Mary and, above all, to Christ Jesus this night, and for ever more.