

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 24, 2018 (Christmas Eve)

“No Vacancy.” You’ve seen those signs outside motels along the highway. When you’ve been on the road for a long time and that cup of coffee you picked up at the last gas station is no longer doing the trick and your eyelids begin to droop, you start scanning the side of the road for a place to spend the night. If the sign says “Vacancy,” you stop. If it says “No Vacancy,” you keep driving and hope you can stay awake until you find a place that has an available room.

“No Vacancy” is the modern equivalent of “No room at the inn,” a phrase that figures prominently in our Christmas story. At the end of their journey, seeking shelter in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph keep encountering No Vacancy signs. They knock, the door is answered, and they are turned away. Again and again and again they are told, there is no room at the inn. No vacancy.

Reflecting upon the Holy Family’s experience that night never fails to break your heart. Mary, great with child, perhaps experiencing those first, early contractions. Joseph, frantically seeking a place for his young bride to give birth. Mary and Joseph, fearful and alone in an unfamiliar and unforgiving town.

Yes, we know how the Christmas story will unfold. The manger, the birth, the shepherds and angels and kings. We know that despite the difficulties, before the night is through, Mary will hold this child in her arms and we will all lift up our voices and sing, “Christ the Savior is born.”

But I invite you to pause and imagine the moment of rejection, the moment of No Vacancy, the moment of no room at the inn. We have all felt this void, this emptiness, this sense of abandonment in our own lives. It is precisely this brokenness that Jesus comes into the world to heal. That’s the source of our Christmas joy.

You know, you don’t often encounter a priest who actually owns a “No Vacancy” sign, but I know a priest in Vermont who recently acquired one. My friend and seminary classmate, Rick Swanson, didn’t buy his “No Vacancy” sign to put up outside his church in order to keep the pews from getting too crowded on Christmas Eve at St. John’s-in-the-Mountains in Stowe.

But he and his husband Tim recently became innkeepers. They bought a seven-room inn, renamed it the Swanson Inn of Vermont, and are now open for business. So of course, they needed a No Vacancy sign.

I called Rick last week to ask if this whole innkeeper thing was going to make it into his Christmas Eve sermon. As the source of rejection, innkeepers aren’t exactly the heroes of the Christmas story, but there is something rather Biblical about a priest who doubles as an innkeeper. At least this time of year. Plus, I was hoping he’d have some great “no room at the inn” story I could use from my own pulpit.

He told me they haven't yet had to turn anyone away, but they did get a late night, emergency call from a couple whose car broke down and they needed a place to stay. Rick and Tim were able to accommodate them at the last minute; which is nice, but I was a little annoyed to learn that the woman wasn't nine months pregnant and they didn't send her off to their ramshackle barn to give birth.

The point is, even though Father Rick didn't have much for me to work with, we are all innkeepers on Christmas Eve. We all have the opportunity to make room in our hearts to receive the Christ-child anew. This night is pregnant with the possibility of renewed relationship with Jesus Christ.

We have a choice, of course. We can instead hang out the No Vacancy sign. We can insist that there is no room at the inn and carry on with our lives. But being here on Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of our Lord is an important way of making room for your faith. I am delighted you are here. The saints and angels rejoice because of your presence. When you make room for Jesus in your life, you are changed and transformed and made whole through the great gift of divine relationship.

In a few moments we'll stand and belt out Joy to the World. That's not a great news flash — Christians have been singing that hymn on Christmas Eve for generations. But in the first verse we'll sing, "Let every heart prepare him room." I love this line because, in the end, it's all about hospitality. Preparing room in our hearts to receive Jesus, while also reaching out our hands in love to those who most need it. As metaphorical innkeepers our role is to do just that: to prepare room.

Preparing room isn't without cost in our lives. It's much easier to turn Jesus away; to ignore the demands of loving God and loving neighbor, to hang out the No Vacancy sign. Preparing room means making sacrifices. It means looking beyond ourselves and our own self-interest. It means opening our hearts to those in need. It means prioritizing the life of faith even when it's inconvenient, even when it takes us out of our comfort zones. By preparing room in your heart, you make room for the stranger, you make room for those who exist on the margins of society, you make room for the least and the lonely and the lost.

Preparing room, *that's* where life's treasure resides. It's what brings joy — not the fleeting happiness of opening the next present, but the deep, abiding joy of living life in harmony with God. It's what offers hope in the midst of even the darkest situations. It's what offers peace amid the unsettling busyness of our lives. Preparing room in our hearts, allowing Jesus in — that's what Christmas is all about. There is still room at the inn; and on this night, you are invited into the comfort and joy of the one, true inn; the one that exists in a stable in a little town called Bethlehem.

May you know the joy that comes from preparing room for Jesus; may it fill you with hope and peace this season; and may you have a very Merry Christmas.