

Home for the Holidays

by Susan Meissner, author of *A Sound Among the Trees*

Christmas has a way of beckoning us home, doesn't it? We long for our loved ones to be seated at our holiday tables, gathered cozy in our festive living rooms, and posing for family photos at the blazing hearth. Expectations can be high and disappointments can run deep when what we want – everyone home for Christmas – isn't what we have. We want to be home and we want everyone we love to be home with us.

It's interesting that we should feel this way when we consider that Joseph and Mary were far from home the night Jesus was born. The shepherds that celebrated with this little family on that starry night were strangers, not loved ones, and the setting wasn't cozy or festive. And yet when we think of that first Christmas, we think of joy, serenity, warmth, peace. Home.

When I was writing *A Sound Among the Trees*, the idea that Home is more than just a house, was a theme that moved me, so much so, that I strove to instill in the house that appears in the book layers of human emotion. When I imagined this house experiencing, if you will, the Christmases of the Civil War, I found myself contemplating how much we attach heavenly attributes to our earthly houses. We don't say "House, Sweet House" for a reason. It's Home that we are drawn to.

The Israelites sojourning in the desert were homeless for four decades and yet God did something remarkable in those years of wandering. When God gave the Israelites instructions to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness, He was essentially making His home with His people, right there in the middle of their homelessness. 'Tabernacle' is a word we don't use much these days, but it means to dwell, reside. To be at home. This was an amazing concept to the Israelites. And it still is. It's no accident that Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means "God with us." At home with us. John 1:14 aptly and beautifully reminds us of this: "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

Perhaps it could be said the pull toward home that we sense at the holidays isn't so much reminiscent of the Bethlehem night Jesus was born, but rather a much older notion; that of being wrapped in the wonder of God's dwelling place, as if our hearts know the very idea of Home begins in heaven, the place Christ left when he came to earth as an infant Savior.

As I write this, my Air Force chaplain husband is far away from me, deployed to the Middle East. He won't be at our house for Christmas. But that doesn't mean he won't be home for Christmas. It comforts me to know whether we are together or apart, in a desert place or relaxing in bright gaity, we are both sheltered within the safe walls of God our dwelling place.

It's true that there's no place like home for the holidays. And equally true that there's no home where God has not placed Himself this Christmas.

That's the heart of the holidays. God came to us. God dwells with us.

He is our home.

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Psalm 91:1