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## Advent Joy: The Joy of the Incarnation is in Tents

Howard Schaap

Dordt College, [howard.schaap@dordt.edu](mailto:howard.schaap@dordt.edu)

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# Advent Joy: The Joy of the Incarnation is in Tents

## **Abstract**

"If the Christmas story in Luke is framed with joy, there is a different kind of joy in John, a strange kind, the joy of tent-living."

Posting about finding our security in Christ from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/advent-joy-the-joy-of-the-incarnation-is-in-tents/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, Advent, joy, homelessness, tents

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# in things

December 18, 2018

## **Advent Joy: The Joy of the Incarnation is in Tents**

**Howard Schaap**

On June 16, 1992, a tornado destroyed our neighbor's house and farm across the section to the west. This is the closest I have come to natural disaster, to losing my house.

That same tornado, an F5, ate half of Chandler, Minnesota, and dented the water tower right where the slogan "In God We Trust" was painted.

I remember the chaos of cleanup. Groups came from all over—people with trucks and chainsaws, youth groups with gloves and coordinated t-shirts; volunteers made sandwiches out of the American Reformed Church. It was intense; it was positive in its way; it was not exactly Christmas joy.

Or was it?

We associate Christmas joy with the Gospel of Luke. The expectant mothers Elizabeth and Mary are filled with joy, as is John the Baptist (in poor Elizabeth's womb, no less). Then, a few chapters later, on Christmas night, the angels declare their "good news of great joy" to the shepherds who are immediately infected with it, and they run off to find the baby.

But if the Christmas story in Luke is framed with joy, there is a different kind of joy in John, a strange kind, the joy of tent-living. In the midst of the 18-verse, largely abstract meanderings that open the Gospel of John, we get only a few specific images rather than a story. One of those images comes in verse 14: "The Word became flesh," John writes, "and made his dwelling among us." I'm not a biblical scholar, but famously the

emphasis in the verse is on a makeshift dwelling, literally, “The Word became flesh and tabernacled”—or, for North American minds—“pitched his tent among us.”

I am tempted to call it a cute verse, but there is something more serious going on in John’s turn of phrase, too. Sure, pitching a tent can be fun. No doubt the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, which John is probably trying to conjure in this verse, was a ball for kids, a time when you got to leave your house to live in a makeshift dwelling for a few days. Sukkot is a harvest festival, a notoriously joyful time, so the structures actually imitate the booths that farmers lived in during the harvest.

Still, harvest time or not, joyful or not, temporary housing is temporary housing. As with all festivals, Sukkot is about being reminded of our relationship to—which in another way of saying our dependency on—God.

But acknowledging dependency is not easy for modern minds like ours. In fact, it seems like a way to celebrate our frailty, and why in the world would we celebrate that?

There is little we believe in more these days than security. The major developments in government in recent years all have to do with keeping us secure: the Patriot Act, the Office of Homeland Security, and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act all came into being to keep us secure in various ways. Arguably, Donald Trump is the security president: he will keep the bad guys out through travel bans and walls, and he will make Wall Street robust so that our retirements will be secure. Recent talk about gun control also centers on security—do guns keep us safe or not? In private financial matters, too, we put our money where our mouth is to secure our stuff and our retirement. We insure our houses against fires, floods, hail, mold, tornadoes, termites; we insure our cars against teenage drivers and deer; we have retirement funds to insure us against old age.

In security we trust.

For all this emphasis on security, it is ironic that in the modern world we are as homeless as ever. The western world is in crisis because of the failure of modern governments and diplomacy, which have created a stream of refugees that have in turn caused political upheaval in many countries, raising the specter of neo-Nazi and white nationalist groups. The news of 2018 was also dominated by natural disasters, hurricanes, and fires that our technology has at least failed to protect us from if not exacerbated.

Whether we will admit it or not, the migrant caravan symbolizes the failure of capitalism as a system: global capitalism has failed to raise the tide for all boats, creating wide

swaths of desperate poverty instead; deportation of gang members from the US has seeded these poor countries with crime; government and corporate collusion has flooded these same countries with guns that arm these gang members whose rule drives the desperately poor north toward security; then we blame people in the caravan for seeking our very own idol: security.

Even in our elaborately remodeled and artistically decorated homes, we often find a type of homelessness. In *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, Steve Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh discuss two types of homelessness: that of people living under overpasses and on the margins of our streets, and that of people who live in penthouses and airplanes, the jet-setters who literally carve a homeless existence above—and disconnected from—the earth. Both, they argue, are afflictions of modern existence that amount to homelessness. Wendell Berry and others would question how many of us are actually native to our places by other standards: do we know the watershed that is responsible for our drinking water? Do we know the landfill where we dump our waste? Do we know the flora and fauna unique to our landscape? The tilth of the soil?

All of this talk of homelessness brings us back to the joy of John 3:14, the joy of tent-dwelling.

The joy of this verse is the joy of incarnation, and that is a complex kind of joy. It's joy in the fact that the God of heaven would make himself a tent of flesh and come to live in tents with us. It's not a magic wand kind of joy that just supernaturally builds houses for us. It's not even the joy of security, that nothing bad will happen to us. It's the joy of the tent city because God has come to live there, too. God with us. In tents.

As such, the joy of the incarnation is the joy of the blues—out of our suffering comes hope, despite the evidence on the side of disaster and despair. In our suffering, we get a shared experience with God himself. Out of tragedy, comedy. Out of death, resurrection. You live in a tent city, without any security? Your God lives next door to you.

It is the kind of joy in this 1935 poem by Countee Cullen. As you read, look for the tent:

## **Any Human To Another**

The ills I sorrow at  
Not me alone  
Like an arrow  
Pierce to the marrow,

Through the fat  
And past the bone.  
Your grief and mine  
Must intertwine  
Like sea and river  
Be fused and mingle  
Diverse yet single  
Forever and forever.

Let no man be so proud  
And confident,  
To think he is allowed  
A little tent  
Pitched in a meadow  
Of sun and shadow  
All his own.

Joy may be shy, unique,  
Friendly to a few,  
Sorrow never scorned  
to speak  
To any who  
Were false or true.

Your every grief  
Like a blade  
Shining and unsheathed  
Must strike me down.  
Of bitter aloes wreathed,  
My sorrow must be laid  
On your head like a crown.

This blues-y poem gets it right. The best of our houses are tents (a thorn in my side is the roof leak in my house that I can't find the source of). And ownership—though a good gift of God like many modern conveniences and institutions—is given to hoarding and pride (“all my little own”).

The real joy of incarnation may not be a permanent sort of joy at all. Yes, we have joy that a path of salvation has been made for us and our place in heaven is secure. Even

then, do we rely on the grace of God or do we believe in the theological house we've made for our own security?

The real joy of the incarnation may be shared incarnation, continued incarnation. The word of God embodied in our actions toward others.

As the migrant caravan made its way into Mexico a couple of months ago, I heard [this report](#) on NPR. In it, you can hear the joy of children at the smallest of gifts—lollipops. Of course, the joy of that lollipop is fleeting, but it is a kind of tent-dwelling joy that counts for something with a tent-dwelling God.

Recently, friends from Toronto posted a picture on Facebook of the ornament they received this Christmas. When a [shooting](#) happened just down the street from where they live in Toronto, they took in a couple who needed a place to rest. That is Christmas incarnation. Likewise, during Hurricane Florence, one of the places people found to live was in other people's homes.

This Christmas, we may find ourselves singing the line, "Come into my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee." If we serve an incarnational God, we will also make room in our houses, in our own security, for those who need a place.

Yes, that may put us at risk.

And, when it is a tent-dwelling God in whom you trust, that may also be exactly the point. That is the risk of incarnational joy.