

“In this very room”
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021

In this very room...Christmas Eve is such a special time to be together...in this very room. From my youngest days I looked forward to coming to the Christmas Eve service. I would sing out the carols. I would listen intently to the story of Mary and Joseph, Bethlehem, Caesar Augustus and his census of the entire Roman world, the shepherds watching their flocks by night, and the angels from whom we would hear on high...I'd throw my head back and let the glo.....ria rattle the rafters. But all of this was in preparation for the moment that made it all complete. The lights would go down in the sanctuary. Our pastor would walk to the Advent Wreath, burning now with the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love...and finally that night some lucky family would have lit the Christ candle. From that one candle, the Christ candle, with the lights down low in the sanctuary, the flame would be passed person to person, until we all carried the light of Christ. And then we would sing, “Silent Night.” Looking at my brothers and sisters, my parents, our lifelong friends in the church, our choir, our pastor, there was more than heavenly peace. There was a sense that for that precious and sacred moment, peace had come to earth. In this very room...Tonight, the night of Christmas Eve, we will light the candles. Tonight, the night of Christmas Eve, we will sing the song and rest in the holiness of a very holy moment. Tonight, we will do all these things...in this very room.

If only for once a year, in a house of worship like this, we could do what we will do tonight, we would be blessed. But tonight, I want to proclaim to you that it is not just this very room, and it is not just on the night of Christmas Eve...No! People of faith experience the peace, the presence, and the power of God “In this very room” in many and varied places at all times of life

A man was traveling on a ship bound for Europe. He was traveling with a heart wracked with sadness and pain. This heartbroken man had sent his wife and four daughters on a similar trip, the trip of a lifetime, a transatlantic voyage. On that ship that carried the precious cargo of his wife and four daughters, there was a shipwreck. His wife survived. His

four daughters all died. Having survived this disaster his wife cabled her husband, "Saved alone." Receiving that devastating cable, his life wracked by grief, the man boarded a ship and headed to Europe to be with his wife. When the ship passed the spot where his daughters perished, something profound happened. His daughters did not return to life. But in this very room, which that night was a ship sailing through a dark night on the Atlantic Ocean, the heart of the man was comforted by the peace, by the presence, and by the power of God. That night he wrote the words to a hymn that have helped so many when they have faced their own seasons of sadness and sorrow. "When peace like a river attendeth my way...when sorrows like sea billows roll...whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

It happens in church, that sense of "In this very room." It happens on ships and on highways and byways, in the quiet corners and the busy intersections of life. If it happens in all these places, it probably shouldn't surprise us that it happens in places as strange as the bar of a hotel in the Greek town of Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is a place the Apostle Paul visited on his missionary journeys. We were leading a group from our church in Texas on a trip of Greece and Turkey, a trip, "In The Footsteps of St. Paul." Earlier that day we had been at the biblical town of Berea and from Thessaloniki we were headed to Philippi the next day. After dinner in Thessaloniki, we walked by the bar in the hotel where we were staying. We recognized another group at the bar, for they had also been at Berea earlier that day. They had taken over the piano in the hotel bar and they were singing.

We stopped to listen as they sang show tunes from Broadway. Then they turned to the Beatles and these folks were having fun. Somehow one of the members of our group got dragged in to sing with them, and she found out they were members of a Filipino church from Southern California who were on a Christian tour of the biblical sites where Paul had travelled. Now I can't think of a more abrupt transition than to go from singing Broadway show tunes and Beatles songs about Yesterday and Yellow Submarine and Obla Dee Obla Da life goes on....to singing church hymns.

But there in that hotel bar in Macedonia where 2,000 years before a stranger came to town telling the story of a man named Jesus who was the Savior of the world, in that hotel bar the person at the piano began to play a hymn that has been played many times at many places among many, many people who have a deep faith and trust in God. The person at the piano began to play, "How Great Thou Art." In that moment the hotel bar became a glimpse of heaven as Filipinos from California and Presbyterians from Texas and anyone else who happened to be present began to sing. We came to the last verse, the verse where creation achieves its final goal, when all God's children of every race and nation and tribe and tongue will be brought together to dwell with our God and to know him face to face. "When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, 'My God how great thou art.' Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art." And right there, in a hotel bar in the seaside town of Thessaloniki, the Spirit of the Lord manifested himself and it was so obvious, so real, so beautiful that Jesus, our Lord Jesus, was in this very room.

If God shows up in bars and on ships sailing the oceans, it shouldn't surprise us that God also makes his presence felt on the beaches of Westerly, Rhode Island. I don't even want to try and name the number of times God shows up at Weekapaug and Watch Hill and you better know God is a frequent visitor to the Westerly Town Beach and Misquamicut State Beach. God's power and majesty are on full display when the storms roar. The joy and blessing of God is heard in the happy cries of children chasing and being chased by the waves. Those who rise early and those who stay late see the glory of God in the rising and the setting of the sun, risings and settings often accented with the most stunning displays of color and light.

This past May God showed up at Misquamicut in a way I will never forget. God's appearance in the early evening hours of Thursday, May 6th, was an especially welcome appearance. Our local clergy group had been discussing how we might process the deep loss and sadness

associated with COVID. We finally decided to have a worship service for the whole community, and to have that service on the beach at Misquamicut. Reaching out to all our member congregations, we asked them to submit the names of loved ones whose lives had been lost during COVID. When we arrived that evening and took our place, we were all hoping and praying that Jesus would be with us, "In this very room." And yet as we hoped and prayed that Jesus would be with us, there was confidence born of numerous other appearances, appearances on ship decks and hotel bars and a host of other expected and unexpected venues, there was a confidence that Jesus would be with us. And that night it was just as we hoped, just as we prayed, and just as believed it would be. There on the sands of state beach, Jesus was with us, "In this very room." The names of all those who had been lost were read with quietness and reverence. As the service drew to a close, we sang familiar words, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Even though we have come to expect that Jesus is with us in this very room, we would not have that hope, we would not have that prayer, we would not have that confidence if there wasn't a stable, a stable where a tired traveler and his expectant wife had found a place of refuge after being refused at all the houses and homes in that little town of Bethlehem. There in a stable, while the cattle were lowing, Jesus Christ was born. And that stable became the first place that humans experienced the unique presence of God's one and only Son, the baby boy Jesus. That night was the first night that the song was raised, "In this very room." That night was the first night, but it was not the last night. And tonight, like so many nights before, in so many places on so many occasions, happy, sad, joyful, heartbroken, surrounded by loved ones or cold and all alone, we know Jesus is with us. We know Jesus, our Lord Jesus, is in this very room.

Be near me Lord Jesus I ask thee to stay, close by me forever and love me I pray. Jesus is near us. Jesus is near us and he will stay with us and he will never leave us and never forsake. Tonight, in this room, just like every day and every night in every room in every place in this

world, Jesus is with us...Jesus is with us...Jesus, our Lord Jesus is with us...in this very room.