

It has been nearly ten months since worship has been held in the sanctuary at First Parish Church – ten months! That’s a long time to be away from a loved and sacred place. It’s a long time to go without the life-forming, life-sustaining, activities that take place in this room.

We know the church isn’t a building. It is a community of people. We know that our faith life cannot be contained within four walls. Still, when we don’t gather in the sanctuary, it feels like something is missing from our lives. If we could convey a message to our sanctuary, it would be — We love you. We miss you. We long to return to you.

And what if our sanctuary could respond? In a poem written by author Maren Tirabassi, she imagines how our empty church sanctuary might feel and what it might say to us. In her poem, the sanctuary says:

**Your sanctuary misses you. I miss you a lot. I miss the organ vibrating under my floor, an anthem that tickles the ceiling. I miss being splashed with baptism, the grit of rice, the weight of the casket when you let a loved one go. I miss the smell of bread cut in small-enough-everyone-eats pieces. I miss people leaning over pew or chair back to say “peace” or “hello,” or smile at a child. I even miss the prickly poinsettias, lilies that make me sneeze, and the time it rained and animals came inside to be blessed.**

I love Maren Tirabassi’s suggestion that the sanctuary misses us as much we miss it. It’s hard to think of this place empty on Christmas Eve. But what if it’s not empty? What if, like the inn on that first Christmas, this sanctuary is actually quite full? Tonight, I invite you to imagine that there is no more room in the sanctuary. It’s filled to capacity with memories of stirring music and powerful sermons. It’s filled with good-will and possibility. It’s filled with the tears and disappointments you’ve left here over the years. The Holy Spirit has moved into the last remaining spaces.

Tirabassi puts it this way. **I [your sanctuary] want you to remember this—your loving sanctuary was never the manger, or the field outside Bethlehem, or an oasis under a star, though pageants, carols, and those drippy little candles might confuse you.**

**I’m just the inn, and my job is to say to you—  
And everyone else—**

**I am full (of many good things),**

**But go around back to the stable in your heart and there you will find the child with Mary and Joseph and the sweet mash-up of woolies, camels and angel host.**

Members and friends of First Parish Church, if you were there on that first Christmas, you would not have found Jesus in the inn. You would have had to walk around

back, to the stable. In fact, Jesus will spend much of his life outside, bringing good news to the poor, feeding the hungry, associating with those that others despise.

Where will we find Jesus this Christmas? He spent his first days on earth with God's creatures that lived in a stable. Even today, we will find Jesus outside, among those who are out in the cold and the darkness. But he is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Friends, there is a light within you. You are invited to take it outside and let it shine in the dark places of this world. Just like the inn on that first Christmas, there is no room in the sanctuary. The good news is that Jesus is outside...welcoming us.

The poem is "Your Sanctuary Misses You (A Letter)" from the book *Christmas Eve at the Epsom Circle McDonalds and Other Poems* by Maren Tirabassi