A man was sitting at a stop light one morning about a week before Christmas. The lady in the car in front of him was going through some papers on the seat of her car and didn’t see the light turn green. She still had not moved by the time the light turned red again and out of frustration the man, with windows rolled up, began screaming epithets, beating on the steering wheel and gesturing vehemently. A few moments later the light turned green and the woman in front proceeded on her way, just as a police officer approached the man’s car and tapped on his window with his gun drawn. The man exited his car protesting that there is no law against yelling and screaming in one’s car but was asked to sit in the back of the officer’s cruiser anyway.

After about 2 hours in a holding cell, the arresting officer told the man he was free to leave. The man stormed out of the cell and continued his tirade, “I knew you couldn’t hold me for yelling in my own car! You haven’t heard the last of this!” The officer let the man finish and then calmly and sternly said, “I didn’t arrest you for shouting in your own car. I was directly behind you at the light and I saw you yelling and waving your arms and banging on your steering wheel and I couldn’t help think what a jerk you were being. Then I noticed the Cross hanging from your rear view mirror and your ‘Choose Life’ license plate cover, the Jesus fish on your trunk and the ‘AM 820 Catholic Radio’ bumper sticker and thought you must have stolen that car.”
We are only four days away from Christmas and unfortunately this can be a very stressful time. We rush from place to place preparing for gatherings and buying gifts and getting ready for Christmas. Unfortunately, I’m sure many of us have found ourselves in a situation similar to this too; hopefully not as dramatic though. We try so hard to make Christmas a special and even magical time that it is almost impossible to realize the goal that we have taken great pains to make a reality. So often though, we fail to realize that the celebration of Christmas is supposed to be the result not the goal. What I mean is that the celebrations and gifts we share with family and friends are meant to be an expression of the joy realized in the true meaning of Christmas which is a celebration of God dwelling among us; they are not meant to be the end in themselves.

Now, I’m not going to lie to you, I get caught up in all of this myself. Shopping, baking, cooking, cleaning, making lists and CHANGING them twice; I’m as guilty as anyone. Honestly, it sometimes takes Charles Dickens and Charles Schultz to remind me of how to put the real meaning of Christmas into action and to make me focus again on others and what is really important about Christmas. Christmas is the event in which God humbled himself to dwell on earth as one of us in the humblest of circumstances in order to fulfill the glorious and eternal promise as He planned from the beginning. God comes to dwell in and with us. This is His gift to be celebrated by us in a spirit of awe, joy and thanksgiving. Like most gifts though, its significance isn’t understood or appreciated until we open it and take time to experience it.

We get a sense of this today in our first reading and Gospel. Both deal with where God is going to dwell. In the first reading, David acknowledges the power of God and in a moment of clarity realizes that his success and peace is a result of God’s providence. Yet the physical presence of God on earth, the Ark of the Covenant is outside in a tent! That is no place for God to dwell especially when David, as the beneficiary of God’s goodness, resides in a peaceful palace. David’s intentions are good but God reminds David that it is He who made David who he is and there will be more to come. God will take care of and
prepare *His own* dwelling place. Thus in the Gospel, God reveals the manner in which he is going to prepare His own dwelling place: not in a magnificent palace or ornate temple but rather in a humble, simple and UNBLEMISHED creation of His own, the Virgin Mary…contingent upon her acceptance of course.

Our challenge in this busy time is to prepare ourselves in order for God to come and dwell within each of us. This is what Christmas is all about: it is not just a memorial of an event; rather it is a reminder of the on-going event of God dwelling here on earth with us and in us. Our joy and giving should flow from this revelation. Seeking and experiencing the joy of God’s gift to us first makes that same joy manifest in the gifts we give and share with others. The readings today show us that God prepares US for His coming if we allow and accept Him in humility and simplicity rather than excess. It’s not complicated, yet WE tend to complicate it. When we do, we tend to lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas. It’s what causes us to rush around; to lose patience; to lack concern for others as we ironically and frantically buy gifts for others; and it can often manifest itself in a way that is certainly inconsistent with the spirit of Christmas and with our Christian identity. It all goes back to preparation. Regardless of the messages we display, it’s when we try to prepare things ourselves with the wrong focus and without God that Christmas preparation results in frustration that leads to yelling and screaming and banging on steering wheels, instead of experiencing the awe and wonder of Christmas with Joy and Peace.