

“I’ll be Home for Christmas”

The days leading up to Christmas are some of the busiest travel days of the year. Statistics tell us almost 105 million people will be driving somewhere for Christmas this year while over 102 million will take to the skies. That is the most since they year 2000. It makes me glad that all of our family lives in Greenville County and the farthest I will have to go is to the other side of town. Of course, all of this is happening because it seems as if everyone is heading home for the holidays.

What do you think of when you hear the word home? Can you already smell Grandma’s bread baking in the oven or taste Aunt Sally’s macaroni and cheese? Are you dreading hearing Uncle Jack tell the story again this year about the Christmas he spent snowed-in at the Detroit airport? Will you get to hold the newest member of the family as she welcomes in her first Christmas?

But maybe the word “home” is not as comforting to you. Home might mean hearing mother and daddy fighting again or feeling resentful because your brother and his family never bother to make the trip. Home might be a place where the strict discipline you grew up with overshadows the few times you received the encouragement that you needed or where you know that too much eggnog will be served. Truth be told, home means different things to different people but we tend to go home for the Christmas because where we come from is a part of who we are.

While travel circumstances for Mary and Joseph were quite different, they were just as chaotic. Perhaps even more so. They were going home too, but not by choice. The Emperor

Augustus had ordered a worldwide census which meant that everyone had to go to their place of birth to be registered. So Joseph, who was from the lineage Judah, had to go to Bethlehem, his ancestral home. This meant that he loaded his wife Mary, who was great with child, on the back of a donkey to travel 80 miles through hills, valleys and who knows what else to be counted as a tax paying citizen. Sounds worse than going through security at the Atlanta airport!

But as we think of our own journeys home, not just this year, but at any time in our lives, and compare them with this well-known prelude to the birth of Christ, we learn something about where our true home is and what we will find when we get there. And for those who only come home out of a sense of duty or with no expectations of finding any joy, Joseph and Mary's trip to the city of David may be helpful. And it holds a message of hope for all of us.

Consider this: Augustus was a Roman statesman and military leader who had absolutely no belief in or allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, David and Joseph. In fact, Heads of State in 1st century Palestine considered THEMSELVES gods and their subjects were to bow down and worship them when they passed by. Yet God used the ego of this pagan who wanted to be able to brag about the number of subjects in his kingdom and build up military might for Rome to fulfill the plan that God had for his OWN kingdom.

So, the first thing we learn from Joseph and Mary's trip home for that first Christmas is that God is in the story, even if we don't know it. For hundreds of years, God had told the Chosen people through the prophets that this trip would occur. The writer of Deuteronomy recorded that the Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah (Numbers 24:17), Micah said that the savior would be born in Bethlehem (5:2), and Isaiah foretold that he would come from Jesse's branch, King David's father.

So, the census was really all part of God's grand plan to help His people realize that when God has a plan, *that* plan will be fulfilled. Joseph's return to Judaea seemed man ordered but it was perfectly planned by God. This teaches us all that, even when the world seems to have lost its center, God is still in control. God uses the most minute details and seemingly insignificant events in life as well as our fumbling attempts to be faithful and even some acts that are downright sinful to accomplish God's plan.

But even more than the sovereignty of God, I believe that the story of Mary and Joseph's first Christmas can teach us all about what "home" really is. This can be a real blessing because everyone doesn't have warm, fuzzy feelings about home. Some of us may not have the opportunity to go home, because of distance, our jobs, finances or a wide variety of other reasons. In fact, some people may have never had a home to go to.

But God's love reminds us that home can be a person. The one person that you feel completely safe with or the friend that you know will never judge you or the sister that knows all your secrets or the neighbor that has moved away that still calls so you can spend hours talking with about everything and nothing. All of those people can be home for you.

The late Poet Laureate Maya Angelou wrote in All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." While Mary and Joseph had no room to dwell in in the place of his ancestry, they were home in the cave where Jesus was born. Surrounded by animals with only the quiet of the evening sky and the light of the stars, Mary knew that she had Joseph. And he was her home. What a comfort this must have to her as she labored and gave birth.

You see, Jewish law would have allowed Joseph to divorce Mary when she announced she was pregnant, unbelievably by the Holy Spirit. Yet his faith and his honor led him to stand

by her. The Scriptures do not elaborate on what kind of treatment she received but knowing how, even today, people whisper behind the backs of young girls caught in similar situations, we can only imagine how much it meant to Mary to know that Joseph was in for the long haul. Mary found safety and acceptance in Joseph, along with love. That is the kind of person that God sends to be your home.

This is one part of their story that reassures us that God gives us many kinds of homes and they are often not made of bricks and shingles. Sometimes, a verse or Scripture will be your home. As a pastor, I cannot tell you the expressions of peace that I have seen come over the face of someone who is dying when you read that verse that wraps them in safety.

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.” “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” “Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” “I come to the end; I am still with you.”

Sometimes home is a song. It may be when you hear your three-year old sing “Itsy, Bitsy Spider” or when Carrie Underwood sings “How Great Thou Art” on the radio or you hear the Yarborough girls sing for us this Christmas Eve. The last word my father-in-law said to me before he died was “Beautiful” because I sang the Irish Blessings to him before I left him. At that moment, I believe we both got a glimpse of home.

When I was a child growing up at John Knox Presbyterian Church, there was only one man that could *really* sing tenor in the choir. When he was there the whole section shone but if he was in the mountains for the weekend, everyone knew it. His name is George Auld and I attended the service for his wife when she died just last week.

One Christmas Eve, I attended the 11:00 pm service at John Knox. I had finished the service at the church where I was serving but knew that I still needed to be fed. When I walked

in, I saw George standing in the choir. I told him later, “I knew it was Christmas and I was home when I got to hear George Auld sing tenor!” And friends, God helps us find home in people and Scripture and songs because of God’s great love for each of us here. It is the same love that the Cantrells spoke of when they lit the Advent candle of love. It is unconditional, forever love.

This is the kind of love that God has loved his people with even before creation. Before the foundation of the earth, as the Apostle Paul tells us (Eph 1:4). It was *that* love that Zephaniah shared with the people of Judah six hundred years before the birth of Christ. When God realized that the Reform that the good King Josiah had instituted in God’s people were not taking hold, he sent Zephaniah to warn them.

Zephaniah told of all the surrounding nations and cities that God was judging them for their immorality and sinful human pride. He reminded them that God used the cruel Assyrian army to destroy nearby Nineveh as a warning. Yet God’s people continued to live as they pleased. Ultimately, God would judge them too and send them into Exile in Babylon. But not before God offered them hope.

The verses we just heard are God’s promise to Judah. “I will gather the outcast,” that is to say, the sinful, the greedy, the self-righteous, the crooked. And then God extends the promise to include these words. “I WILL BRING YOU HOME.” As a loving parent, God would be forced to discipline this backsliding nation and condemn her for her sins. Yet, God would not abandon them, nor leave them paralyzed by fear. Indeed, the commentaries often sum up these verses by saying that God would dwell in their midst.

And that is the Christmas meaning of home. Wherever we are in our lives, physically emotionally or spiritually, we are at home when we allow God into our lives. God was with the people in their sinfulness in Judah. God went with them into Exile and brought them back to

Jerusalem. God is with us now, even in the midst of what we are dealing with outside of the Christmas event because God is our home – Emmanuel.

And of course, that is why we were here today. That is why we will go home for Christmas, whether that is to a house or a church or a person or a song or a verse in the Bible. We will be able to take the hope, peace, joy and love that are represented by our candles this morning with us to Christmas Eve and beyond because of that word of love. The baby Jesus. Emmanuel. God is with us. Indeed, these four words are a summary of the entire Christmas story.

Friends, the Gospel – the Good News of Christmas – is that each one of us comes from the heart of God. We come FROM love, FOR love in order to DWELL in love forever as we share God’s love. God planned every detail of creation with us in mind out of love.

In fact, God even planned for our future home out of love. As Christians, we know that God’s love did not just come to a rest in a feedbox in the side of a mountain. My favorite Christmas song, the one that is home to me, is a little-known song by Natalie Grant entitled “I Believe”. In it she sings, “I believe the wiseman saw the baby boy the angels called the son of God. Heaven's child, the great I am, born to take away my sins through nailed pierced hands. Emmanuel has come. I believe.”

God’s love could not be contained in a manger or in a town or even in one heart. It is and always will be a love that is sacrificial. Our Gospel today and every day is that the baby in the manger was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed beneath the shadow of the cross. God’s plan included the life, death and resurrection of God’s only son. By this we know that those whom we love who have passed away this year but claimed Jesus as their savior are home for

Christmas. And no matter where we journey this year, one day we TOO will all be home for
Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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