

*“Home for Christmas”*

*Luke 2:1-20*

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*Christmas Eve 2011*

There’s something about Christmas that makes us want to be home. The days before Christmas, airports bustle, people hit the road, but for most it’s not vacation. They’re going home. Tomorrow, all day long, cell towers will throw calls around the country and the world, but people won’t be calling for business. They’ll be calling home.

What is it about being home for Christmas that tugs on hearts? Is it the same thing that makes mom’s pumpkin pie taste the best even though the recipe is straight off the can? Is it that we know deep down that the people who love us are among life’s most precious gifts? Or could it be that a yearning to be home for Christmas, even if only in dreams, flows from that first Christmas Day when a brand new family didn’t know it was Christmas at all?

Mary and Joseph didn’t know it was Christmas but they knew they weren’t home. Joseph’s people were from Bethlehem, so when Caesar Augustus ordered a census Joseph and Mary packed their bags for 70 mile road trip from Nazareth to Joseph’s ancestral town. How many generations it had been since Joseph’s family truly called Bethlehem home? Maybe quite a few. There apparently weren’t any relatives there to take in Joseph and his full-term bride. For Mary, this surely was not the delivery she had envisioned—after three or so days on the road, in a strange town, with none of the Nazareth women who would have been there to help, had she delivered in her hometown. And for Jesus, what does it mean to be born but to be kind of kicked out of the house? Even the shepherds had to leave the fields and flocks to travel and find the babe in the manger. The first Christmas day everyone had to leave home.

If there’s something unsettling about celebrating Christmas in a place that doesn’t feel like home, what do we make of this first Christmas day when no one is home but everything seems to be well? Our imagined manger scene could include Joseph dashing around to find water and cloths, but we tend toward nostalgia—Mary gently holding her child, a big brown cow looking on, the family looking like they wouldn’t want anything to be different. We could envision shepherds terrified, face-down before angels out in the fields, but we tend toward rumped men with staffs kneeling at the manger, lambs curled at their sides—a scene of now-all-is well, nothing the least bit jarring about it.

With the terror armies of angels, the trials childbirth in a stable, and everyone ending up in places they don’t seem to belong, we could easily debunk nostalgic readings of the story of Jesus’ birth. But maybe a faux-cozy manger scene isn’t far from theological truth. There is something right about thinking of Joseph and Mary and

shepherds gathered to the child in the manger like a family gathered to a warm hearth in their living room.

The deep truth of Christmas is very much about the comfort, the deep resonance, of knowing you are home. Christmas is about God birthing a plan to take those who are distant from God, who are alienated from each other, even who sometimes feel as though their own lives are uninhabitable space, and to make a home with us so welcoming and warm we'll want to live in it forever. Those who come to the manger, who kneel before Jesus Christ, have come home not just for Christmas but for always and forever.

"Enter in, be born in us today," says the hymn about the little town of Bethlehem. The wonder of Christmas is that any space, any life can become a home for the Christ. The child we envision as lying in a heap of scratchy straw can make a home where we are grumpy and abrasive. The babe we imagine to sleep peacefully amid lowing cows, bleating sheep, and the ruckus of chickens can make a home in disheveled households that never seem fit for company. Among those for whom Christmas at home this year doesn't feel like Christmas at home because a loved one of Christmases past isn't there this time around, the babe says, "I'm moving in and I've brought with me some comfort and some hope."

We can see so many things when we look at our lives, our families, our jobs, our world. Some days we see chaos, other days hope. Sometimes life is looking up, other times we don't know how we'll make it. There might be moments when life feels tidy and pretty well swept up. More often than I'd like my life and soul feel like they could use a good housekeeper—someone who'd scrub, organize, prioritize, and declutter.

The good news is, however we see ourselves, Jesus looks at each of us and sees a manger, a place he would be pleased to call home. You might say the greatest gift of all is when Jesus comes home for Christmas. Amen.