

Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2011 10:30 Service Luke 2:1-14 "Home"

We think of Christmas as a time when family members come home. If you've got college-age kids away at school, they come home. Grandparents invite everyone to their house for a traditional feast, with that great mac and cheese casserole or the pumpkin pie that is better than anything you could buy at a bakery. Friends gather other friends around them, cherishing a feeling of homespun love and appreciation. This is the time when we all come home, even if our homecoming is just in our dreams, as the old song says.

But that first Christmas was a very different story. Each of the people in this story was not in the comfort of their own home...they were away from the familiar warmth and comfort that we seek in our own holiday celebrations.

Think of Mary and Joseph. On the road, despite her bulk with a baby due any moment. Traveling because the government required it, and as far from home as they had ever been. If you've ever seen a pregnant couple stressed out and exhausted by holiday travel in the airport, take that image, multiply it by ten, and you've got a sense of how Mary and Joseph probably were feeling when they arrived in downtown Bethlehem.

Think of shepherds, who spent much of their lives away from home herding sheep up on the hillside outside of town. They were not exactly the highest-class people in Bethlehem...shepherds were considered outcasts of a sort, because they were smelly and dirty from tending the sheep outdoors most of the time. And it was wintertime, and even in the Middle East it gets cold at night in the wintertime.

Think of the angels. They were not up in heaven, where things are always pretty and peaceful. They weren't enjoying a quiet evening sitting around the divine throne. No, they were flying around on a cold winter's night, talking to a bunch of smelly shepherds.

I know this one is the hardest to imagine, but think of Jesus. One moment he's with his Heavenly Father in, well, in heaven. He's perfectly comfortable because heaven is, after all, perfect. Then all of a sudden he is a squalling human baby in a cold and ripe-smelling stable, surrounded by a group of folks he's never met before, and who don't seem to understand what he is trying to say to them, namely, that he has this strange craving for some milk.

Each of these players in the divine drama is away from home. Each one is in unfamiliar territory, lacking the comforts of their homes, lacking the family around them that would make their difficulties seem manageable.

And yet, something happens.

Something happens, and they manage to create a home. In spite of what they don't have, they celebrate what they do have.

Mary and Joseph might have expected that their new baby would be born in their own home, with Mary's mother and cousins helping her with this first childbirth. Joseph might have visualized standing outside the house, waiting for word of the birth, sharing a skin of wine with his friends. But here they are, in this stable, with the wind whistling through the cracks, with animals – animals! – around them. No women to help Mary as she labored. No men to laugh and slap him on his back after the good news. Just the two of them, plus a cow and a donkey and such, breathing their sweet warm breath, and the sharp shine of stars overhead. And somehow, Mary and Joseph, and soon the little baby, make this stable into home. It is home as they watch their newborn, wrapped warmly in swaddling clothes, and they realize they are not just a couple anymore, they are a family, and wherever the family is, is home.

The shepherds, expecting that this would be another cold night on the hillside with meager food, gather close around a small fire to stay warm. They may be away from their families as they herd the sheep and await the birth of new lambs, but, by the heavens, they can make themselves a decent meal and share stories and laughter. A little home away from

home, not as good as a warm bed, but it will do. But then they hear this strange and wondrous news from the angels...angels who should be grumbling at being away from heaven in the middle of the night, but who take their mission as God's messengers seriously and tell these bedraggled shepherds a revolutionary piece of news. And in that moment, the angels and the shepherds are joined together by God's news, and there is between them a home of sorts, a home and a family of those who have experienced the unimaginable.

The shepherds, shocked by what they have heard, go travel to that new home in the stable, and they become part of the family, too, sitting quietly, basking in the warmth of the Holy Family's love, in the glow of the infant's holiness.

And Jesus, a tiny baby, knows that he is where he is meant to be, where the world needs him to be. He is the hope of a troubled world, a world that makes a pregnant mother and her husband travel a long distance near her due date for a tax enrollment, a world that makes shepherds into outcasts, a world that makes a rude stable the only place available for a stranded family.

They are all home. Not the homes that they expected or planned for, but the homes that they need to inhabit. A home of their own creation, of God's creation.

We think sometimes that the only good Christmas is the one in which the whole family gets together at grandma's house, eating the familiar foods, singing the same songs, telling the stories we've told a thousand times before.

But perhaps the story we hear tonight is that home and family are what we make, with God's help. Home is the place where we feel God's peace. Family is the people who teach us Christ's love. Christmas is the day when we remember what we are called to do in this broken world, to lend a hand to that pregnant family with the flat tire at the rest stop, to offer a dinner invitation to the person who has no place to go on this day, to tell a funny story to someone who feels blue or a shared memory to someone who is grieving.

If we learn nothing else from this story of people away from their homes, ordinary people who became part of an extraordinary story, we should learn that our truest home is not a place, it is in Christ. Our truest family is not those with whom we simply have a biological connection, it is with those in whom we can see Christ, and who can see Christ in us. This is the gift of this story, the one that frees us from the expectations of a confused world. It is about Christ. It was always about Christ. It will always be about Christ. Where Christ is, that is Christmas. That is family. That is home.

Merry Christmas, and welcome home.

Amen.