

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
December 19, 2021**

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 2:1-7

Christmas week is here, and I know some of our number have already left town to spend the holiday elsewhere. The flip side of that is that some of us will be welcoming loved ones from elsewhere into our homes this week. Our daughter Ellie is due in from Baltimore later today. She was supposed to be spending this Christmas with college friends in Europe, but the recent COVID surge prompted them to cancel their trip. I imagine theirs are not the only travel plans that will be disrupted by the pandemic this year.

Travel is an inherent part of Christmas, always has been. Read Luke and you know what I mean.

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

It couldn't have been easy for them, a trip like that through the rocky hill country of Galilee, traveling south across the sandy flats and rolling hills of wilderness, to reach at last the little town of Bethlehem in the shepherding country south of Jerusalem. She was pregnant and there was no comfortable way to get there riding on a donkey. It was dangerous, too. A miscarriage or injury to the fetus could have been deadly for both mother and child.

For Joseph it was a necessary imposition because of the decree, being of the house and lineage of David, he had to take his family home for Christmas, to Bethlehem.

Those of you who are parents know that travel with kids this time of year is never easy. That first Christmas after you have nested with a spouse or partner and Christmas comes around there is always that question, "Where will we go for Christmas?" Some run from parents and family, others can hardly wait to see them. But once the children come, it gets more complicated being itinerant, what with the pampers and the strollers and the car seat and the renting the car and the schlepping upstate or out to Kansas or wherever it is. And the worst compromise of all is Christmas at his parents and New Years at hers so that all the grandparents and family can see the kids. And of course, the kids are eating candy and fighting over the toys and bouncing all over the back seat, getting spoiled in ways that will be a punishment for the parents for weeks to come.

I usually warn couples whom I marry that the time will come when they must establish their own Christmas customs at the home they have made and announce those

customs to their parents unilaterally. “We’re doing Christmas at our place this year. You’re welcome to come.” When that happens, the real marriage is on.

Nevertheless, Christmas always takes us home somehow, whether we travel or not. Because the home that I’m thinking about is a special place in our mind and heart where Christmas takes us. A place in our memories with dimensions and walls, furnished in a specific way and inhabited by specific people. It’s a place where we belong, which is to say that it belongs to us, where we feel safe and welcome, even though things at any given time there may not really have been all that good, and yet they were.

It is a place that we carry deep inside us that welcomes us back again and again, if only we can remember how to get there. And I wonder if children who never had such a home do not have it nonetheless as a dream of a place. And so maybe we share that, all of us, because the place that is home in our heart and memory has a kind of dream-like quality to it anyway.

The first Christmas Eve after my father died, my mother invited close family friends to join us at our home for dinner and the final preparations for Christmas. Our tree had been up and decorated by that time for a week or two, awaiting the gifts would appear as if by magic Christmas morning. Now it was time to set out our stockings by the fireplace, along with snacks for Santa Claus and his reindeer. There were a glass of milk for Santa, a bowl of water for the reindeer, and a plate full of the Christmas cookies we children had made and decorated under mother’s guidance a few days before for them to share. I was seven and my younger brothers and sister ranged in age from eighteen months to five years; we all jockeyed for position in this ritual, with mother ensuring that even the youngest had a part to play.

When all was ready, we lined up on the sectional sofa opposite the fireplace for photographs, and then pressed close to “Uncle” Tom Davis, a teacher with my parents at the local high school, as he read to us from the illustrated “Night Before Christmas” as my father had liked to do. By 7:30 we children were tucked into bed, and the adults went off to church for Christmas Eve services. Sleep came slowly to me that night. Like any child, I was excited at the prospect of the gifts and goodies Santa Claus would bring. More than that, however, I sensed somehow in that anticipation of things marvelous and unseen a connection with my missing father. Visions of North Pole and heaven...reindeer and angels...jolly, loving eyes looking down on me...danced in my head.

In the years that followed, Christmas Eve remained for me a particularly “thin place,” where earth and heaven drew close together. My mother decided that our family should never be alone that night, and that the best way to stave off our own loneliness would be to invite others in that same boat to be with us. She extended the family circle to include a number of older women who were on their own: Aunt Blanche Butterfield and her late husband’s sister, Doris, who had never married; Blanche’s younger sister, Aunt Katie Johnson, who had lost her husband, Harry, the town’s butcher, a decade earlier; Lulu Kisselbrack—“Miss K” we called her—a much beloved second grade teacher whose beau never returned from the war. Dinner became more elaborate: great crocks of homemade soup, breads and cheese, hams and roasts, all sorts of cookies and candies. Our numbers swelled with neighbors and friends from church and school. “Miss K” took on the annual reading of “A Night Before Christmas,” with her former second-

graders, now gangling teenagers and young professionals home for the holidays, gathered in a circle around her, smiling again at the familiar illustrations and competent story-reading voice.

The evening's culmination was in packing into the pews of our little Methodist church in town for a simple service of Christmas hymns and carols; the familiar story from Luke's gospel; words of wonder from the minister; and candlelight passed hand to hand to the singing of "Silent Night." The world did indeed seem all "calm and bright" as we disbursed with hugs and "Merry Christmas!" all around.

Wherever home is at Christmas, that place where we want to go in our heart, it is no doubt a composite, a place of comfort and joy that is the fulfillment of a hope and expectation of a lifetime to find that home again that lives inside of each of us, in spite of the disappointments and heartbreaks we have known.

My former colleague Jon Walton, now the pastor emeritus of First Presbyterian in New York City, tells of how one year, a few days before Christmas, he found himself in a business machine repair shop, looking for a secondhand typewriter to give as a Christmas gift to a friend who wanted a typewriter. She wanted the old-fashioned kind. Not electric. And a young fellow who looked, by the lines on his face, as though he had lived a hard life and was older than his thirty or so years, came forward to wait on Jon. This young fellow's teeth were spaced unevenly in his mouth, some of them missing in the back, and there was a jagged scar on his face that betrayed some kind of barroom brawl that he'd been in more than the careful work of a surgeon's repair. There was a bumper sticker over his work desk that reminded him and everyone else of his slogan for living, "Easy Does It."

Jon was wearing his clerical collar at the time and so the young man asked Jon where he was a preacher. Jon answered and the young guy told him that he attended a twelve-step program that met in a nearby church on Thursday nights. He wondered if it was the same one. "I pray every day, Reverend," he said. "You know the Serenity Prayer?"

"Yes, I know it," Jon said, fearing that maybe he was going to ask him to say it with him right there in the dingy repair shop. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change..."

"You do know it?"

"Yes," Jon said, a little overwhelmed by his enthusiasm.

"Here, I've got it on a card," he said, shoving it into Jon's hand. It was smudged with the oil and grease of years of his handling it in that grimy shop. Jon handed it back to him appreciatively and smiled.

Well, Jon found the typewriter he wanted on a shelf nearby and said he'd take it. And the clerk wrote up the bill and Jon paid for it with cash. And as he turned to leave, Jon wished him rather casually, a "Merry Christmas."

And the clerk came right back with no hesitation and said, "Oh, no problem there, Reverend. I'm going home for Christmas; gonna be at my mother's house. Haven't been

there in seventeen years. So I know I'm gonna have a merry Christmas." And then as an afterthought without knowing anything about Jon, he said, "Hope you get there too!"

Jon says he paused for a second and there must have been a quizzical look on his face, as he said, "Excuse me?" Jon thought maybe the clerk was inviting him to his house. But then the young man said, "Home... home for Christmas. I hope you get there too."

And every year, Jon says, he now remembers this fellow's question and his wish. "I hope you get home for Christmas, too." Because deep inside of all of us, whether we know it or not, it's what we all want for Christmas, or better said, need.

My first Christmas away from home was in 1982. I was 29 and single and had been transferred to Tokyo that year by my employer, Exxon Corporation. I was high on life, proud of my independence and my very responsible job. I can't say I had Christmas much on my mind. Japan, of course, is not a Christian country to any extent, but the Japanese spend a good of December holding what they call *bōnenkai*—"forget the year"—parties, and these celebrations occur amidst the plethora of secular Christmas decoration that Japan has adopted from the West.

A day or two before Christmas, I decided I should make a least nod toward the holiday. I managed to find a scrawny evergreen tree for my apartment and decorated it as best I could. My family back in the States had made a cassette of Christmas greetings and sent it, along with a slew of gifts to put under my tree. My apartment was awfully quiet. Of course, this was long before you could Zoom or Facetime. In fact, even long distance phone calls were so expensive that we made them only rarely and then watched the clock carefully while we talked. So as Christmas Eve rolled around, I was on my own and more than a little lonely.

I decided I would take myself to the Christmas Eve service at the Tokyo Union Church, an English-speaking congregation located not too far from my apartment. I was not much of a church-goer during my twenties, so it was my first time there. I figured I should get there early, and I took a seat in the rear of the sanctuary. I watched the sanctuary fill with happy families and excited children. I couldn't help but think of my family, gathered in our little Methodist church on so many Christmas Eves gone by. And then, the organ swelled and the choir began processing and the crowded congregation was on its feet singing, "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem."

And tears started streaming down my face. And I realized that there is a home someplace that I do want to go back to, or maybe find, a place where there is comfort and joy and welcome, where the glow of human love meets the warmth of heavenly compassion. A place that may never have existed except in my mind, but that exists nonetheless, a place where when you get there, they are glad to see you.

And of course there is such a place. A place so much like home that when they see you coming they put the candles in the window and another log on the fire. That place that Christmas always takes us, if only we will go.

To Bethlehem, to that place where a manger holds a child and all the world keeps watch, a place far away yet near at hand, where the hopes and fears of all the years are laid upon a child who is lying in a manger.

That is the place where we long to go in these Advent days, surrounded as we are by the purple vestments and minor key music of this season, the moody outward yearning of our inward spiritual longing.

We lean forward in these days to that place where by Friday night we will run with shepherds and kneel with kings and lay down the burdens of our lives along with all the treasures we have brought with us, no treasure being more valuable to him than the treasure that we are, just the way we are, don't change a thing.

And there he welcomes us "as is," and all the rest that is not right—he makes right—he heals—simply by our being there, by worshipping him, by being so close to someone so good.

And that is my prayer for us all in these latter days of Advent, that amid the shortest days and longest nights of the year, we find our way all the way home to that manger in Bethlehem where we are expected.

Are you going there? Will you get there too?

Come sit by the fire, there's a place for you there. They've put the candles in the window and a log on the fire. What a sight for sore eyes you are. We thought you'd never get here. Welcome home.

Welcome home.

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengths us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.