

“Home for Christmas”

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14

First Sunday of Christmas, (Dec.29) 2019

Kyle Childress

We know almost by heart the scriptures read this time of the year. John 1, that we just heard, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.” I love this passage.

“Dwelt among us,” means that he moved in with us. Literally, he tabernacled with us; he pitched his tent among us. He moved into our neighborhood.

The Luke 2 scripture we read on Christmas Eve is even better known. For example, “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger;” [WHY?] “Because there was no room for them in the inn” (2:6-7).

New Testament scholarship points out the word that is usually translated as “inn” is, in the Greek a word which, means literally “guest room.” Not hotel or inn like a roadside inn. But “guest room.” Luke says that there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the family “guest room.” Apparently they had to be placed somewhere else in the house, in the family home.

It was fairly common in many of the homes of the first century in the Mid-East for there to be a designated room for overnight visitors. It did not mean that the room was not used for other purposes at other times, but in the dictates of hospitality in that day and time, it would have been unthinkable to send out of town guests, especially family members, to a roadside inn. What most likely happened then is what often happens now: we shift everyone around, unfold the couch, make pallets on the floor, and so on until we find a place for everyone. The only problem in this biblical story from Luke 2, was that everyone was returning to their family home due to the tax and census-taking ordered by Emperor Augustus, there were more relatives coming back than the family had guest rooms.

By the time Mary and Joseph arrived, the guest room was filled and so they had to be placed in the next best place in the family home, which according to the biblical scholars, would have been what called the “outer room.” It was common for the animals of the family: the milk cow, donkey, perhaps some sheep, goats, maybe chickens, and so on, to be kept in an outer room of the house. In a room attached to the house, perhaps the back of the house, sometimes a kind of shed, was where these animals were kept during the night, especially during cold weather. In the mornings, the animals were taken outside or to pasture, and the room was swept and cleaned and used for other family activity. This was where the feed trough was for the animals, the manger. It was in this outer room.

Some of you have traveled this week or will be traveling. Others have had or will have family members traveling here. You know what’s going on with Mary and Joseph.

Jesus was not born in a stable of some cold, impersonal first-century motel. But rather he was born in the outer room of a home. Aunts and uncles were in and out helping. Aunts were boiling water and hovering about. Uncles were bringing in some clean hay and straw and putting down blankets for the young family and the newborn baby. Goats and lambs were shooed outside, and cousins looked around corners until they too were shooed away by adults for fear they'd wake the sleeping baby.

For Mary and Joseph, these days among extended family must have been a particular treasure. Soon enough they would be forced to flee for their lives as refugees from the wrath of King Herod. There would be dark, difficult days ahead. But for now, they were home, among family and friends and neighbors. When God Incarnate, Jesus, was most frail and fragile, a baby, he was cared for in the context of a home, safe amid the mundane blessings of a family.

We make incredible efforts to be home for Christmas or prepare our homes for family members coming. And whatever challenges we'll face it will be worth it because we are home. Home for Christmas.

Of course, not everyone will be at home this Christmas – soldiers and sailors, Marines, and Airman in far-away places, many of them in the midst of war. Here, on our own streets of America, including here in Nacogdoches, are folks who are homeless. Some of them spent Christmas in shelters, others were in crude shelters of their own making, living under bridges and in alleys and vacant lots.

They could tell us a thing or two about home.

Did you know that most of the Bible was written by and for people who were homeless. Most of the Bible was written in the context of exile. Exile is being away from home, but more, it is being alienated from home or no longer having a home. Cut-off, disconnected, out-of-touch, no one knows us, no one cares. Thrown in cages, stuck behind a wall. No one talks with our accent or eats the food of home. Exile.

We long to belong. We want someplace where we fit in. Where we have our place. A good place, “where everyone knows your name,” like the old television show *Cheers*, theme song put it. Christian Mogenstern says, “Home is not where you live but where they understand you.” Of course, I love how Robert Frost put it, “Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.”

But Christmas is about more than this. It is more than Mary and Joseph coming home, safe in the outer room of the family home-place. And it is about much more than your or my homecoming this Christmas. It is about God. It is about the Lord of Lords, King of kings, Prince of Peace, the Savior, coming home. We couldn't get to God, so God came to us.

You see, our true and only home is in God. We couldn't get home. So God brought God-self to us. God brought us home. God comes among us in this mundane, ordinary family story we love as the nativity story. And God comes among us in our mundane, ordinary families and in this extended family called

Austin Heights Baptist Church, where there are aunts and uncles everywhere, and cousins running here and yonder. God has chosen to dwell, move in with us and bring us home.

One of the earliest Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament is simply “place.” God is place. Your place. Where you know who you really are and where you fit in. Your place. Your home. God.

What we call “incarnation” is somebody sleeping on the foldout couch in Sally’s old room. That somebody is “God with us.” Our God came in out of the cold to dwell among us. And provide for us a home. Zacchaeus was in that sycamore tree and Jesus said, “I’m coming to your home today.” Well, that’s us. Jesus, God Incarnate is coming into our house, sitting down at our table, sleeping on our couch. Jesus wants to make your house a home.

When we hear the popular Christmas song, “I’ll be home for Christmas,” we think in terms of that song meaning us. We sing that song about ourselves and our loved ones coming home for Christmas. When Matthew, Luke, and John hear this song, they hear Emmanuel, Messiah, God, with us, dwelling with us. It is God saying, “I’ll be home for Christmas.”

Why do we care about home during Christmas? Families will come from far and wide even though most of us have plenty of family problems. Some of us don’t speak to others in the larger, extended family. We’re angry. We harbor old resentments. And the pressure is on to make it right and good and we have to make

it right and good with Aunt Mabel whom we can't stand and she can't stand us. We have family secrets, sin, silliness, pettiness, grief, sadness, but also love, laughter, and the little joys of home. In the middle of all of that, here comes God. God comes into your home, your dinner table, your family, so that God will give us a real home. No longer cut-off, isolated and alienated from one another, but members of one another in Christ – home. You know, of course, that in the New Testament this is church. God is our home and we begin to know God as home, here the church. Home.

The last, almost the last chapter, of the last book of the Bible, ends in a great shout of joy: *See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...* (Rev. 21:3).

Home.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.