

## Christmas Eve, 2024 Meditation

### “Are You Going Home for Christmas?”

What more frequent question do we hear around Christmas than, “Are you going home for Christmas?”

Home and Christmas belong together. Some of our most cherished memories circle around childhood Christmases at home. Hardly able to get to sleep on Christmas Eve, waking early on Christmas morning to open presents. Children in footie pajamas. Or, those trips back home to be with our families and friends. It’s an elemental feeling this longing for home and being at home at Christmas. We need not sentimentalize it. Christmas at home can bring painful memories as well. Not all Christmases are Hallmark Christmases. Jesus didn’t come just to perfect homes, but to our real ones!

But our truest home might not be the one behind us, but one that lies ahead. Home is anywhere love dwells, and God desires love for us all. Friendship love, family love. The love given us in our pets and beloved animals, and the love we return. Neighbor-love which surprises us in the connection. When, where have you felt most at home?

What is the quality of this home-like love? The poet Robert Frost writes about the meaning of home:

Home is the place where, when have to go there,

They have to take you in

But then he thought again and added:

I should have called it

Something you needn't to deserve.

That where home is, that somewhere and someone where there is a love you don't have to deserve. Unconditional love. Whenever, in whomever you find that, there is home.

On this night, this gracious and hallowed night, we pause in the silence and in the candle light to give thanks for the Home that is God, the Home given us as God came in Christ to make a home with us.

The angels announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds with the words, "Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be to all people." And for these shepherds who lived on the margins of their society, they needed perhaps most of all not to be afraid. They were included in "all people", to whom the good news of great joy had come! And so are we. Henri Nouwen says that in Christ we move from the House of Fear to the House of Love.

To come home to God is to come home to your own dear self, your truest self, for you were made in the very image of God, you Maker.

We have come tonight as near the manger as we can get. How do we get in? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant young theologian who risked his life to help Jews get out of Germany as Hitler took power, who saw the German church fall under the thrall of Hitler, and who was later executed on orders of Hitler, knew the answer. He had said sharply to his church in that hour, “Only he who cries for the Jews is permitted to sing Gregorian chants.” Or tonight, we might say, “permitted to sing Christmas carols.” Of this holy night he wrote:

Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism, beside the manger; whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be on high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness.

Bonhoeffer himself had been on that journey, from the golden child of his youth to the famous young theologian, to the one who said one day that he had moved from being a theologian to being a Christian, and gave himself for the lowly because his Lord had.

If you travel to Bethlehem today, you will travel 6,000 miles by plane to Jerusalem, and four more miles by car or taxi to Bethlehem. It is today a war zone in Palestinian territory which has become rubble and the land of dying children.

Then you will come to the Church of the Nativity. It sits on the site of a shepherd's cave where tradition says it was there Jesus was born.

If you go into the Church of the Nativity, you must stoop to enter the front door; only children can enter upright. A parable itself. It seems right that we must stoop and bow to enter this holy place. To go on to the place where Jesus was born, you then descend a staircase to a room underneath the chapel. It is 13 by 13 feet. On the now marble floor is a silver star marking the spot. Who would not want to kneel, to touch it, maybe even place our lips upon it?

A Carol begins:

How far is it to Bethlehem

Not very far

Shall we find a stable-room

Lit by a star?

How far? Six thousand miles? The three days' journey Joseph and Mary had to travel? The three weeks' journey across sands the three Wise Men traveled? How about that sixteen-inch journey, the journey from the mind to the heart, sometimes the longest journey of all—that spiritual moment where the mind descends into the heart, and all the world seems one and all the world seems right.

David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, wrote last week of his long journey to faith. He said that at one time Christmas was only a time of celebration, but now it is also a time of humbleness, as he comes near the manger of lowly one who came to save.

The grown-up Jesus said that to enter the kingdom we must become as a child.

Can we get that little tonight?