

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018

Welcome to our Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. Wendell Berry writes:

I know that I have life
only in so far as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind.

We are here tonight to carry the candle of love against the wind.

“No One Is Alone”

Christmas Eve 2018

In his novel, *Mr. Ive's Christmas*, Oscar Hijuelos wrote of the “majesty of the child,” and of Jesus as “perhaps the most wanted child in history of the world”. The Christmas story helps us think of the majesty of every child, and of every child as dearly wanted. You could build a church or community or nation on this.

We've been thinking of the meaning of salvation this season. In his book *Redemption*, British Theologian Alister McGrath offers a number of images and meanings of salvation. The first two were startlingly simple, and go right to the human heart: “Being wanted”, and “Coming home”. What two images could be more apt for Christmas Eve. They speak to salvation as “belonging”, belonging to god and to one another.

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Salvation as being wanted, being wanted as a child held in its mothers arms, as you and I being held in the arms of a Christian community. Such is the enduring power of Mary holding her new born child, captured in art for 2,000 years.

Every single person on earth has a need to belong. The need is physical, relational, spiritual. And yet we all of us have a fear of not belonging. Am I really wanted?

This is what the church is, at its very best, a place of belonging, a place where we are wanted. We are Mary's arms, God's arms to the world around us. Will you receive the gift of being wanted this night, then be this gift to those in our community? I have met so many people through the years who have, for any number of reasons, suffered the loss of Christian community and now grieve that loss. Let us say, "You are wanted here."

Fred Craddock, one of my favorite preachers tells the story of playing hide and seek as a boy. Do kids still play hide and seek? One person closes their eyes, counts to a hundred, the others hide, then she comes to find them.

Fred's sister closed her eyes and counted to a hundred. Fred and the others ran and hid. Young Fred thought he had found the perfect hiding place: underneath the back steps, huddled tight against the foundation of the house. He hid and waited. After a while he began to sing this song inside his head: "Nobody's going to find me, nobody's going to find me." Then he thought to himself: "Nobody's going to *find* me!"

Guess what he did? He stretched out his leg so that his toe peeked out from behind the steps. When he was found by his sister, he dusted himself off and said, “Shucks, I’ve been found.” But that’s not really how he felt. He was secretly happy: he had been found!

Isn’t that what we all want most in life: to be found? Here is the Christmas Message to us all: God has come to the far country of earth to find us and lead us home. Luke knew the centrality of this message. That’s why in Luke 15 he told the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son.

II

Which brings me to the second image of salvation: “Coming home”, home to God, home to family, home to friends who have become family, home to our own dear self.

The Hebrew people had two great stories of coming home: 1) Being led out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land; and 2) Coming home from Babylonian captivity. Tonight we see all the ways God comes to save—being wanted, coming home, forgiveness, reconciliation, wholeness—past present, future concentrated in a single point, a single life, this child in a manger whose name means God comes now, has come will come to save.

In the passage from John we heard the immortal words: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The deepest meaning of the word “dwelt” is this: And made his home with us. And because in Jesus god made His/Her home with us we can be God’s home to one another and to those searching for home around us.

Christmas and “home” go together don’t they? Songs like “I’ll be home for Christmas”. And how often have we asked, or been asked, “Where are you going for Christmas? Are you going home?”

Tonight above all nights God is saying: You are not alone. You are wanted, you belong. Welcome home.

Part of you may draw back, we become suddenly shy. Am I truly wanted? Can I trust this? Parker Palmer says that the human soul is like a wild young deer in the woods. It must be approached slowly and with care lest it run away. Such is why tonight amid half light and candles God almost whispers: You are wanted, welcome home.

The title of tonight’s meditation is “No One is Alone”, my favorite song from the Broadway musical, “Into the Woods”. It is a mash up of a number of familiar fairytales. But amid the giants and witches and houses in the woods, the theme is “no one is alone”.

That is the message of this night when God came to dwell with us in Christ. It is the night when, “Once upon a time” becomes, “For all time”, and “Once for all”. Even us.

Tonight we gather around a table of grace, as those wanted and brought home by God.

Here is bread, bread from heaven, and here is the cup, the cup of mercy, never ending mercy.

Then we will take candles and join in a circle and pass the light. We will look around and see each other’s faces. Are faces ever more beautiful than when lit by candles? And we will sing and be silently thankful to God.