

Each year I listen to a local radio station that plays nothing but Christmas songs with no interruptions or commercials between Thanksgiving and Christmas. One of the more popular songs has been “I’ll be Home for Christmas.” Someone has said that at Christmas, all roads lead home. I remember how much I looked forward to returning home for Christmas once I went off to college, and then after Judy and I got married. I have many precious memories of celebrating Christmas in that old house in Carlisle, South Carolina. After our sons Jack and Ben were born, I cherished the memories of Christmases in our homes in Maryland, Virginia, Atlanta, and Santa Fe as the boys grew from wanting stuffed animals to computers to finally only money for Christmas. And now Judy and I cherish the opportunity to watch our grandchildren Trevor, Logan, and Eleanor opening their presents on Christmas.

Did you know that there’s a story in the Bible about a family going home for Christmas? Of course, I’m talking about the traditional Christmas story found in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke where Joseph returns to his home town of Bethlehem with his new bride Mary who is expecting a baby boy. Listen to this familiar story; I will be reading from the King James Version of the Bible because it is the one that many of us grew up with and the most poetic one.

Read Luke 2:1-20

There are many ways to look at the birth of our Lord and Savior, the Christmas story, but tonight let’s look at it from the perspective of the family. Christmas is a time for family, and of all the seasons in the Christian calendar, it is the one that reminds us that we are all part of a family. Now I’m not talking about our biological family, because some of us may not have any close relatives with us tonight. I am talking about the family of God to which we all belong.

The good news that comes from the Babe of Bethlehem is that we are all included in the saving love of God. A pastor was giving the Children’s Sermon to an unusually large group of children. The kids packed every corner around the pulpit area. He ended his brief message by saying “And God loves you and you and you,” pointing as he spoke in three different directions. He paused for a moment to let this message sink in. During the silence, a child down at the far end of the communion rail where he had not pointed said, in a wee, small voice, “What about me?” This child represents many of us who feel that we are either unworthy or don’t belong to this family of God. But we do; believe me – each and every one of us here tonight belongs and are part of God’s family.

Does anybody know when the song “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” was written and why it was composed? It was written during World War II by Kim Gannon. For young and old, fathers and mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”

represented their hopes, dreams, and prayers better than any other song, movie, or story during that dangerous period of history. Not only were families of overseas soldiers caught in a world of uncertainty and fear, but so were many displaced men and women from the rural areas of the country who had moved to New York and other large cities to work in plants and offices. In addition to many of the men and women in uniform, the war had also taken many civilians far away from home. For the very first time, most were spending their first Christmas away from their families, and were lonely and homesick.

This song captured the emotions of a nation in upheaval in the 1940's. As you listen to it today, in a way it sounds more like a letter to home rather than a Christmas carol. There is a sense of hope in this song; a message of "Don't give up; we will be together again soon." The spiritual nature of the song comes from its almost prayer-like message. Christmas in America had always been about family and about remembering the One who made it all possible. Yet World War II had broken those bonds and upset the normal traditions of the holidays. "I'll Be Home for Christmas" eloquently acknowledged the hope that while things had changed, given time, everyone would be home again.

It was a Children's Christmas play, and as the children portrayed the story of the birth of Christ, they came to the part where Joseph and Mary were supposed to be told that there was no room in the inn for them. However, at that point in the play, the boy playing Joseph got carried away with his part, and he began to passionately plead with the innkeeper, pointing to Mary and explaining their difficult situation. Finally, the other boy who was playing the innkeeper threw up his hands in disgust and said, "Aw, shucks, I'm not supposed to do this, but come on in anyway."

While that's not the way the story goes, in a sense, that's what I think God was thinking about when He sent His Son to be born in a stable and to die on a cross for our sins. Can't you just hear God saying, "I know that I'm not suppose to do this, because sometimes you don't behave like you are suppose to as my children, but come on in anyway, because I love you more than anything in the whole universe." Unlike the original innkeeper in the Christmas story, the door to God's heart and house are always open, and we are always welcome at His table.

Some families have a custom of preparing special breads, cookies, or homemade gifts for family members and friends during this holiday season instead of giving gifts brought in a store. The perfect gift is not necessarily the one that costs the most, but the gift given out of love. That's what God did on that Christmas night so long ago; out of amazing love, He gave us the perfect gift, His own Son Jesus Christ. And because of this gift, we are all invited to become part of His family.

Another Christmas song that I have heard a lot on the radio this past week is “There’s No Place like Home for the Holidays.” Maybe you are like me: the old family home is either gone or now owned by someone else; you are the oldest one of the family left; and you have moved around a lot and lived in many houses. Now all of this got me to thinking – what is really a home? I have found in all my travels and moves around this great country that there is a definite difference between a house and a home. A house is made of walls and beams; a home is made of love and dreams. A house is just a structure of wood and brick, but a home is a **family** of love and support. And one thing is sure and that is because of what happened in a stable in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago, we all have a home where we are always welcome and the table is always set. When Jesus went back home, He left the door open for you and for me.

Tonight we celebrate the Christmas story which began in a stable in Bethlehem where our Lord and Savior was born and placed in a manger as His crib. And it ended on a cross on a hill called Calvary and an empty tomb in the garden. On the night before His death, Jesus sat down for His final meal with all twelve disciples, a diverse group of men if there ever was one. There were four fishermen – the headstrong Peter and his brother Andrew, the sons of Thunder – James and John, a doubter, a tax collector, a rebel, and a traitor.

Like the tables that we will gather around with family and friends tonight and tomorrow, the plates were set and the cups were arranged for each guest. Then they broke bread together and shared a meal as a family; a family from many different walks of life; a family not bonded by blood, but by their common belief and faith in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is only fitting that on this special night when we gather together to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior that we also gather around His table to break bread together and share the cup as a family; a family united in our common belief and faith in the baby in the manger and the Savior of the cross. Jesus came over 2000 years ago looking for you and for me so that we could become part of His family and that He could make His home in our hearts. Christmas began in the heart of God, and it will not be complete until it reaches our hearts. Do you really want to be at home for Christmas, then let Christ dwell in your heart and you will experience Christmas everyday of your life. There’s no place like home for Christmas when Jesus Christ dwells there. Merry Christmas!