

Coming Home for Christmas

Isaiah 40.1-22, Luke 2.1-20

FUPC

12/25/16

Christmas is like a time machine. It takes us back to every other Christmas we've spent in our lives, beginning with our earliest memories. And most of those memories revolve around being "home". In college it was the most asked question, "Are you going home for Christmas?" Members of our military on deployment receive hundreds of Christmas cards just because they are far from home and unable to be with family at Christmas. As a child, we'd gather at my grandparents home with uncles and aunts and cousins and my great grandmother when she was alive, and sing carols around the piano, open presents and eat wonderful food with homemade pies and cakes for dessert.

Our Christmas tree at home had few gifts around it...until Christmas morning when somehow so mysteriously, my sisters and brother and I would wake up and walk into the living room together where Mom and Dad would be waiting. And there'd be many more gifts around the tree, including bicycles, birdcages, a model train set, a ping pong table and sleds for when it snowed. And then we'd spend the day playing with our toys, reading our new books, playing outdoors, and feasting on ham and apple pie ala mode for dessert.

It doesn't take any effort at all for me to travel back in time to those sweet, love-filled and happy memories. I can still hear their voices and see their smiling faces and smell the warmth of love coming from the kitchen. I imagine its pretty much the same for each of you... whether you're older or younger, Christmas somehow roots us in our memories of home and for most of us those are very precious memories.

On the night Jesus was born, he was homeless. His bed was a feed trough, his mattress was a bed of straw, and his blankets were bits and pieces of cloth that his mother and father had brought along on a long trip from Nazareth. Everyone had to be registered to pay taxes in the town where they were born. For Joseph, that was Bethlehem. And like KTA, Safeway, Walmart and the Mall, the streets were crowded and finding a decent place to stay was impossible. So they ended up in a barn, a stable... in the company of farm animals. Chickens, a donkey and cow, maybe an ox and a horse. With a few mice looking on from the corner. Later, when Herod was on a rampage to murder any child that could be a threat to his throne... every male son 2 years old and younger... Jesus was not just homeless. He became a refugee, escaping into Egypt under his parents protection. Not only did God enter human history as a baby. God through his son Jesus became a refugee, vulnerable, and targeted by Herod's jealous rage for his death.

There was a time in Israel's history when the Jewish nation was homeless. In Isaiah's time, they had been captured by Assyria and taken to be prisoners in Babylon. It was a strange land with a new language, strange customs, food they were not allowed to eat, and altars to gods they did not worship. Into this wilderness experience, God sends Isaiah with a message that one day, he will bring them home. He will comfort them and carry them as a mother carries a child in her arms. It was a promise they held on to and gave them hope to go on living.

They were strangers in a strange land... separated from their roots and living on memories of what life used to be like before they were captured and became refugees.

I think of the millions of people in the world today who are separated from their home, living as refugees, uncertain about the future, vulnerable to invisible political pride and power struggles. They wander across deserts, over oceans, through the countryside and hide when their lives are in danger. I imagine what memories some of them hold of homes they left behind, pets abandoned, treasured possessions forsaken, family and friendships shattered by political violence, and scarcity of food, security and safety. And FEAR is the word that captures their day to day existence. Fear that they will not find a place to sleep, or food to eat, or medical care for when they're sick. Fear that they'll be returned to the country from which they're escaping which would be a death sentence for them.

And everywhere they go, they are FEARED by countries that are trying to secure their borders because of the possibility that mixed in among the refugees are terrorists who would create massive tragedies with loss of life in the host country. Some politicians and some religious leaders stir up more fear by labeling the stranger and outsider as a dangerous presence we need to keep out of our communities and country. FEAR makes us turn our back on the person we don't know. FEAR has undermined our willingness to trust each other, and so we reject the person different from us, who speaks differently, has a different religion and eats different food.

We've come a long ways from the comforting haven of security we remember as our "home" at Christmas time. It seems like it was a simpler time, less complicated, and the world less connected. For many of us, we can never go home again. That world doesn't exist anymore. Its gone. We've grown up. Moved on. Life has changed. We've changed. We've lost our innocence.

So here's the Christmas message: Jesus teaches us that the way we treat the least of our brothers and sisters is the way we treat him. In the refugees of the world, we meet Jesus. Homeless, vulnerable, hungry and insecure. And the question we are asked to answer is this: Are we people of FEAR or are we people of FAITH? After the crucifixion of Jesus, his disciples hid in fear. They gathered in an upper room and locked the doors. But God had other plans. Jesus appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." John 20.21

The Christ of Christmas who was the baby of Christmas morning, and later the toddler named Jesus who was a refugee in Egypt, teaches us that we are not meant to hide in FEAR from the stranger and the one who is different. We are meant to walk out of our FEAR enclosed prisons of prejudice, intolerance and bias and offer hope and compassion. FEAR breeds irrational terror and hatred. The refugee Jesus calls us, invites us, challenges us, transforms us to witness to the Gospel with generous hospitality, to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loves. That's our calling this Christmas morning. Amen.