

CHRISTMAS EVE 2012

“COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS”

JOKE: Elderly man in Phoenix---calls his doctor son in NYC--- *your mother and I are getting a divorce. Divorce?! After 53 years? What are you talking about? 53 years is about 50 years too long. We really don't even like each other anymore.* Dad! I can't believe this. Hold on—I'm gonna call my sister & I'll get back to you. (calls attorney sister in Chicago) *Sis! You're not going to believe this! Dad just called to tell me that he and mom are getting a divorce!* What?! That's crazy! I'll call them, then we better get down there just as soon as we can. (sister calls Dad back in Phoenix) *Dad? This is just crazy, and besides I'm a lawyer. Don't do anything until I get there—until my brother & I get there. We're coming in on the next possible flights.* Man hangs up the phone and turns to his wife and says, “Well, dear, that settles it. The kids are coming home for Christmas.....and they're paying their own way!” 😊

Welcome Home! Some of you have traveled quite a distance to be here tonight, and I imagine some of you had some considerable hassles and adventures getting here. Some of you have been in a car for more hours than you wish to count. Some of you have come home for the first time in many years, with all the mixed emotions and bittersweet memories that involves. Some of you live here in town, and many of you make this place, Christ UMC, your spiritual home.

The Christmas season seems to carry a lot of emotion and expectation about homecoming. We hear songs like “I'll Be Home for Christmas,” and “There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays.” I received a Christmas card that read: *“Home is not necessarily where you're from....it's where people understand you.”* And Mark Twain reminds us that *“Home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in.”*

With all that in mind, I want to tell you a story about a children's Christmas pageant—or remind you of the story if you've heard it before.

The Children's Christmas Play in one particular church was set to be a grand success. Costumes had been made and fitted to all the angels and shepherds and various animals. Students had learned their lines and rehearsed numerous times. Parents and grandparents packed the sanctuary, and they were armed with all kinds of cameras and digital recorders. The lights dimmed, the music began, and the play was off and running.

The whole thing was going off without a hitch, with the prophets foretelling Jesus' birth, and Mary & Joseph making their way to Bethlehem. The boys in the donkey costume stumbled a little, but Mary held on and everything was going well.

Mary & Joseph arrived on stage, and Joseph went and knocked on the door of the inn, and asked for a place for his wife to stay indoors. The innkeeper was a tenderhearted young man who had learned his lines and recited them perfectly in rehearsal. He said loudly, "No, I'm sorry, there is no room for you here at the inn." As Mary & Joseph turned away, the boy found that he just couldn't go thru with it.

"Wait!" he cried out. "Come back! We'll find some room for you somehow!" Confused by the change, Joseph led Mary into the inn. One quick-thinking shepherd carried the manger over to the door of the inn, and the rest of the play continued on—with the exception that Baby Jesus was born in the safety of the inn, rather than in the stable on the other side of the stage.

According to some Bible scholars, that particular children's play may have more accurately reflected the truth of Jesus' birth than our usual image of a stable out back somewhere. Many homes in ancient Israel included a central living area for the family—then perhaps a guest area for travelers and relatives—and then a sort of outer porch where the family would bring in the animals for safety at night, and for added warmth. It doesn't exactly fit our concept of luxurious living, but it suited the purposes of the Israelites well enough. Their wealth and their livelihood was in their animals, so of course they would want them safe and close at hand during the long winter nights.

Add to this household set-up the fact that the words in the Bible that say, "There was no room at the inn" can also be translated as "*There was no appropriate place in the house.*" Joseph & Mary were in Bethlehem to be counted in the census. Everyone had been told to go back to their hometowns to be counted, so Joseph was joining a lot of aunts, uncles, cousins & various assorted relatives when he arrived with Mary at Bethlehem. Perhaps there was no room for Mary in the house because there were so many other relatives already there!

We know what that's like, don't we?! How many of you are sleeping on the sofa, or in a sleeping bag on the floor, or on a fold-out couch while you're visiting home for Christmas? Sometimes there are just too many folks in town at the same time, and there ends up being no room at the inn for everybody!

However it happens, J & M are offered a place where Mary can at least have a little privacy for giving birth—a place that is warm and safe with the family's animals, and close enough for relatives to help if it's needed. What a different image that is for us! Mary and Joseph and Jesus—not off by themselves, isolated somewhere—but instead close to home, in a town where all of Joseph's relatives either lived or were visiting. **Joseph & Mary & Jesus all came home for Christmas, to the place where Joseph's family had its origins.**

But even with the image of J & M being home and close to family when Jesus was born—even as much as tonight we may long to be home, or be thrilled to be home—or be wishing that home was a more pleasant place to be—Christmas is about much more than physically coming home to celebrate with family and friends.

Christmas is a spiritual thing. It's a God thing, and it's our chance and our invitation to Come Home to God in very powerful and profound ways. Throughout the season of Advent, these last four weeks at the church, we've talked about coming home to the spiritual values of Christmas—coming home to hope, peace, love and joy. All of these are greatly needed in our world right now, and probably greatly needed within our own spirits. They are spiritual gifts that the birth of Christ can bring to us.

Even more than these gifts of hope and peace, love and joy, we need a real HOME—a place to belong—a connection—a purpose and welcome and meaning that lie far deeper than simply being in the right location. We need and we long for a home that transcends the physical world and travels with us wherever we go.

Many comments have been made recently about how different this Christmas seems—or should seem—this year. One father's statement was this: *"Last Christmas we were wondering how to give our children all the things that money can buy—the hottest toys, the latest fashions and the newest gadgets. This Christmas we're wondering how to give our kids all the things that money can't buy—a sense of security, safety and peace."*

In the Christmas story, we can begin to find the way to give our children (and ourselves) those important gifts that money can't buy. God comes to us in the complete vulnerability of a newborn infant, and teaches us that safety and security are not the result of political power or fire-power or military might. God comes to us in a quiet manger scene, and show us that peace—true peace—does not come from victory on the battlefield. True peace comes when we live in strong relationship with one another, and when we trust in the presence of God and in God's protection.

The Christmas story is about what theologians call “The Incarnation” — God becoming a human being, and entering our human world in a unique and powerful way. God comes to us in a form we can understand—a baby, who will grow to be a young boy, and then a teenager, and finally a man—a man who will teach us and show us what real love and real sacrifice are all about.

This is an amazing thing, this God-becoming-human. Many religions in our world might shudder at the thought of the Almighty, Transcendent, All-Knowing God coming to earth to dwell with us. That's making God too ordinary—too accessible. It's like letting God move in and become part of the family and sleep on the fold-out couch!

But that is precisely what Christmas is all about. Throughout human history, we couldn't seem to be able to get to God, so God got to us. God has come among us in an ordinary, family sort of way, in the story of the Nativity. In the middle of our own families—in the midst of all the problems and secrets, sins and silliness, love and laughter and little joys of home----here comes God, moving in on us, as the newborn child Jesus.

The story of this holy night means that God is telling us, *"I'll be at YOUR HOME for Christmas. ...I'll be in your home for Christmas, and in my love you will find your true home, for now and all eternity, with ME."*

God has chosen to be with us—wherever we are—whoever we are—whatever we may have done. When we are in relationship with God, and aware of God's powerful presence.....then we are truly AT HOME—LOVED, HELD , EMBRACED, NURTURED, FED, CARED FOR by the One who has given us life—by the only One who can keep us safe and secure—the only Holy One who can give us peace.

Welcome home tonight. Welcome home to the presence of God.
Welcome home for Christmas. Amen.