

Christmas Eve - C

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Some of you may not know this and some of you here tonight may actually remember this, but World War II affected Christmas traditions in so many, many ways. And not simply because of shortages, though that did affect how people celebrated during the war years. There were political considerations, as well. The glass balls and ornaments made in Japan and Germany were not available, so Corning Glass used its lightbulb manufacturing to create tree trimming made here in the United States. And the Christmas shopping season started earlier than it used to in order that there would be time to ship gifts overseas to those fighting. Drawings and illustrations of Santa Claus tended to make him look a little more American and a little bit less European. Trees and lumber were needed for the war effort, so the war years saw the advent of artificial trees.

And a significant number of Christmas songs that have come to be popular classics were written during World War II. That's why you hear a kind of melancholy yearning in the lyrics of "White Christmas" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" and that most hopeful of classics, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," which I always think must frustrate travelers on crowded planes and highways to hear.

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Now—mostly when we hear the Christmas story, we hear it as I just read it to you now. We leave off at the shepherds returning in praising the birth of Jesus and Mary pondering all these things, presumably somewhat joyfully--or at least with a measure of curiosity--in her heart.

Now, to stop the Christmas story here as we've just done is really comforting. We can freeze-frame the image of the rejoicing shepherds and the winsome Mary into a Hallmark card. But that's not the whole of the story, is it? Because if we just stop at the freeze-frame pretty picture, it ignores the fact that Jesus' birth opened up a can of existential worms for everybody. Because at its most profound, the Christmas story, the story of Jesus—the months leading up to his birth and then the tenuous, terrifying flight to Egypt right after—is all about change, displacement, adaptation.

Now I know it's a cliché to say that the only constant is change, but it is truly a different thing to feel the truth of that statement. And mostly we resist having to feel that feeling—the *change-is-the-only-constant* feeling. And during those times of transition, upheaval or even of immense joy, those times when we can no longer deny the recognition of how our lives are based on change, it can

feel at the same time both isolating and exhilarating to feel how truthful it really is. Change is what we must become most used to. *Change* is what we must become most at home with, even though being “at home with change” sounds like a real oxymoron.

We feel joy, suffer loss, become hardened or softened by the lives we lead. We certainly grow more aware of our own mortality as more time passes. And therefore we are perhaps also more aware of our need to hear the news that, though we can't even begin to understand it, God's promise to us is that our mortality is not the end of our story. Our story ends in God.

The Christmas story—if we take the time to read the whole of it and consider the actual facts of it—can teach us that.

The Christmas story is not at all like the wistful promise in “I'll Be Home for Christmas.” Rather it is about the very opposite of that. Nobody is going home for Christmas in the Christmas story. Nobody.

Jesus wouldn't be *home* for Christmas. He would be in a feeding trough, pricked with straw. Mary and Joseph wouldn't be *home* for Christmas either. They would be in a barn in a town someplace most remembered for its inhospitableness to strangers.

The shepherds wouldn't be home for Christmas. They would be listening to voices coming to them down from the sky—like *that's* normal! And the Wise Men? Well, we haven't gotten to them yet. But we know they were clueless enough about where their real homes were that they followed a star to a barn. A king in a barn is stranger than a pig in a blanket. Yet that is what the Wise Men did. They went to worship a king in a barn. And after that they had to go home, if such a thing as home existed for them any longer, by another way. They went home by a way unknown.

The story of Jesus' birth and life and death is fundamentally not about being home for Christmas. It is most profoundly about the absence of a resting place on this earth and in this life—the mortal life which Jesus had come to share. So if you want to find truth or *real* comfort in the Christmas story, you won't find it in how everybody makes it safely home, because they don't. Rather you'll find it in discovering that the perilous journey goes on. And that God is both on the journey and our journey's end.

Think of it: Mary and Joseph make their legendary trek to Bethlehem. Displaced from their home for political reasons, they go to a place they have to be in order to register and be counted. But upon arriving, they discover there is no place for them to be in order that they can be counted. When I think about that it makes me consider that maybe there is no *place* like home.

Then the shepherds, already sitting in fields in the middle of nowhere, are summoned by an aurora borealis of chorusing angels to go to some other little nowhere for God knows what reason. When I find myself wandering in the mystery of things, I think about their hallucinatory meandering toward Bethlehem. Anybody brave enough to go where the angels tell them to go is either mad or

wise—I guess you only know which by listening closely to what the angels are saying to you.

Then there are the Wise Men. They were hired to do one job and ended up doing quite another one entirely, which probably genuinely ticked off the king who had hired them. And then they went AWOL. When I think about the Wise Men I figure that if they could live with and adapt to radical changes in their plans, I should be no less wise than they.

The Christmas story confronts us with the rough truth that though we can't really see it, we are always in transit, always losing what we had, never to have it--at least not in the same way--ever, ever again. That if we are ever to really have a homecoming, it is only because we had already been sent forth to journey.

I had a friend, a colleague from Montana, who after a meeting or after a dinner when we all said good night, he would say "Safe-home." I always thought of that as a regionalism or a throwback to a more quaint time, not that my colleague was some kind of relic.

But because the phrase was so strange I thought about it and what it meant. Obviously it was some kind of shorthand for "Have a safe trip back to your home," but its very shortness, its clipped brevity seemed speak a full sentence, one that was both a hope and a command, in two words. To remind someone "*Safe-home*" began to seem to me like the promise that, long after we leave the various shelters and abodes we had call homes throughout our lives, we will one day be assured of a home that was our journey's end, our true and final destination. Our *Safe-home*.

Until then, all we have is the promise of God, the witness of the Jesus' own perilous path and the shelter of each other. That is what loving your neighbor is all about, making out of one another shelters along the way. We make for each other little safe homes all along the way in our lives, trusting that our journey's end, our true *Safe-home* is far beyond our need or our control to create.

You may remember that a couple of weeks ago I quoted the poet, W.H. Auden. In his opera-length Christmas poem called "For the Time Being" he wrote that, "The choice to love is open till we die."

Till we die we are always both journeying *toward* God and journeying *with* one another. Along the way we have our little home-comings, our blessings of togetherness, our Christmases that promise that when we part from each other, we will never be without God along the way. And we have that lovely option that Auden reminds us of: the choice to love is open to us till we die.

So let the mad shepherds and the wandering Wise Men inspire you. Let the mighty virgin wife, Mary and the befuddled husband, Joseph, inspire you. Let the little Baby Jesus with his wordless and insistent hunger inspire you. And with such a challenge and such a blessed choice before you, believe in the unimaginable wonder of the word made flesh. Have a holy, tender and merry Christmas.

And *Safe-home*, dear friends. Amen.