

Message: Home for Christmas

The famous song “I’ll be home for Christmas” was recorded by Bing Crosby in 1943. The tune takes the form of a letter from a World War II soldier stationed overseas. The soldier sings to his family, far away in a home he can visit only in his dreams. According to Wikipedia, Kenny Gannon, the author, wanted the song to encompass more than the longing for home from soldiers serving overseas. He hoped to capture the sense of any person who was unable to make it “home” for Christmas, for any reason. No matter what age, people respond to that message. We all share a desire for a true home.

We’ve talked about what home is, what makes a place a home, and where our true home is. For some of us, the question isn’t easy to answer. We experience a constantly changing sense of what it means to be “home for Christmas.” Maybe we’re in the middle of a move or we feel unsettled. Maybe we have a home, but we don’t feel comfortable there. It’s difficult for some people to go home for Christmas or at any time. There are a lot of reasons why.

Mary and Joseph knew that concern. They had to leave their friends and family, and travel a long distance on foot because the government wanted to make sure they were registered to pay taxes. Even though Mary was nine months pregnant and the trip was long, they had to go. Mary showed great courage when she received the news that she would soon provide a home for an unexpected baby. They didn’t understand what the trip really meant or who the baby truly was. Joseph and Mary had no idea of the political, religious and economic challenges to come. They were doing the best they could, trusting God to take care of them.

Creating home is hard for many people in our day and age. There are those who are homeless tonight, without a place to be. Sometimes it’s by their choice. Sometimes it’s forced by things outside of their control. Even when we make healthy choices, creating home isn’t easy. There’s a lot to it. This is true for every generation. Home has never been easy for many of us. Yet our hearts call us to “come home,” not just at the holidays, but throughout our lives.

If you are one of the ones who are able to afford a home, I encourage you not to take it for granted. Circumstances change. Jobs end. Relationships evolve. Our health may lead us to need assistance. You may own a home during one season of life only to leave it when life evolves. We can't get too attached because God is always calling us to be on the move. And God prompts us in mysterious ways.

When we hear a word from the angels, we want to get up and go to the manger where Jesus is, just like the shepherds in the field that night. But there's more to it, because Jesus isn't lying in a manger in Israel today. Jesus is in the world. We need to be willing to go to see where he is. We need to actively seek out the places where God is appearing.

And let's be absolutely clear: God is still appearing. God is appearing just as profoundly today as when God appeared on that starry night in Judea over 2,000 years ago.

I hear Matthew's voice when I look at all the challenges we're facing in the world as we come to the close of the 2017:

“Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name saying, ‘I am the Messiah!’ and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (Matthew 24:4-8, NRSV).

We have a choice. We can be so afraid and anxious that we give in to our fears and circle the wagons, or crawl into our private caves where we hole up and hide until it's safe to come out.

Or we can be like the shepherds in the field. Even though we're afraid, we find the courage and strength to get up and go to the manger to see the promised Messiah. Let's follow their example: don't keep the good news for ourselves. Tell it to others! When you do, you'll find meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life. After encountering Jesus, the shepherds *“made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed”* (Luke 1:17-18). People will be amazed when we share the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

One final thought.

Before we hop in the car to follow the shepherds, let’s be clear about something: This manger isn’t just for us to see, any more than it was just for the shepherds. It’s not just for you. It’s not just for me. It’s not just for the privileged, or the Christians, or the ones who live in a land of freedom and wealth. It’s not just for the family members we like, or approve of, or agree with. It’s not just for the folks who live like us and think like us. It’s not just for some.

This manger is for the entire world. The angels invited everyone to come and see or, as they say in the South, to come home and sit a spell.

Christ is our true home.

The manger is the place where the world comes to kneel on this holy night. This is our true home, our eternal home, the place where we’re welcome and safe. It’s where we soak up Christ’s peace, Christ’s love, Christ’s good will and hope for all people, for all time. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, is the Messiah who came to save YOU.

It doesn’t matter who we are or where we live. It doesn’t matter whether we’ve come home for Christmas or we’re celebrating with a family we have made for ourselves. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done wrong or how much we have in our bank account. It doesn’t matter what our status or identity or background or culture or beliefs are. It doesn’t matter whether we live in a mansion that’s been in our family for generations or an apartment or a car or a tent or a shelter. All of our earthly homes are temporary.

The fact is: there is only one eternal home. It’s the home we make with Jesus. Tonight, we don’t just celebrate his birth. We anticipate the day when Jesus will come again. We do so without fear. The manger is there. You’re invited. Come close. Take a peek. See the child. Look forward with the hope of Joseph, the joy of Mary and the boldness of the shepherds in the field.

The Savior has come. Together let’s welcome Jesus and invite others to join us. Welcome home!

Merry Christmas

Let us pray

Holy God, we come to you tonight as those living in shadow and darkness. The world is a scary place, under the influence of evil. We see injustice, oppression and unkindness at home, in our neighborhood and community, and around the world. We struggle to understand calamities and the suffering we endure. Thank you for the manger. Send your angels to call us, inviting us to come close, opening our hearts to Jesus. Give us the courage to turn to you and be free. Show us how to be your children, so we may live in peace and love. We pray this for all people everywhere, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Luke 2:1-7 (CEB)

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you - wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, “Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.” They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.