



ARE YOU GOING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS?
John 1:1-14

In his book – **LAND'S END CATALOG**, Garrison Keillor writes about the beautiful Christmases that he remembers from childhood. He calls it “a magical day” and says “Among its old customs – the foods – the music – is something that has the power to open the doors to our hearts.” He writes:

**“How beautiful and dazzling bright - One candle on a winter’s night.
How beautiful these harmonies - That echo through the centuries.
And in this singing we shall find - The blessing given to mankind.
A blessing without price or end - A blessing on your house – my friend.”**

Yes, “a blessing on your house.” Is there any season of our lives that is built around home and houses as much as Christmas? It has been said that the heart turns homeward at Christmas. This past week Channel 8 - WGAL – shared the story of one of our servicemen who was allowed to come home to spend time with his family. It was an emotional time. Surely a blessing was on this house and home.

Yes, being home for Christmas is a deep and powerful instinct. I recently read about a group of university ornithologists who took a rare species of bird from a remote island in the South Pacific – to a research laboratory in Southern California. They observed them – studied them – tagged them – and let them go. It was shared that 14 days later – and thousands of miles – the birds were back home on their island of origin – chirping away. Yes, the **homing instinct** is a powerful instinct. The most frequently asked question this time of year is, **“Will you be home for Christmas?”**

I was 20 years old when I first experienced this phenomenon. I was in my junior year at Huron College in Huron, South Dakota.

Mary invited me to spend Christmas with her and her family. **How could I say NO?** So, I went home with Mary to her parent’s home – and eventually to her sister’s home in Hastings, Minnesota. We arrived late Christmas Eve night. On Christmas Day, I felt the instinct and urge to be home. So Mary and I went to find a pay phone in town. We went for a walk. We experienced difficulty in finding a pay phone. So in a moment of desperation, I flagged down a police officer as he rode by us. I explained to him that I was visiting in the area, it was my first time away from home for Christmas, and I wanted to call my mother and father. He was the nicest policeman I have ever met. He had us sit in the back seat of the cruiser and proceeded to drive us to a pay phone. He

had to open the back door to let us out to use the phone. He waited for us until we were done and then drove us right up to the front door of Mary's sister's house. What a 'stir' we caused in the neighborhood when the officer opened the door for us and let us out. It was one of many 'stirs' I caused in this nice – quiet – Presbyterian household.

One of the biggest decisions that a newly married couple must face is, "Where do we spend Christmas?" This is almost as big as how much to spend.

One of the poems I clipped and placed in my sermon file for Christmas shares:

"I don't care where you've settled
Or how far you've chanced to roam,
When it is time for Christmas,
That's the time to be at home.
Now may your Christmas be the best
To trip along life's lane,
And may you spend it happily – With home folks once again."

What images come to your mind when you hear the word '**home?**' For some – the word **home** conjures up images of our hometown where we spent many happy years of our lives. For some – these memories are not happy or pleasant. For some – the word **home** designates a place where they feel 'at home.' For some it is the mountains – the lake house – the seashore.

However, the Bible shares of an even greater homing instinct – our relationship with God. **Psalm 90:1** declares, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place (Home) in all generations." Isaac Watts writes in his great hymn:

"O, God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come.
Be Thou our guard while life shall last
And our eternal home."

St. Augustine was right when he wrote, "That earthly images of home are very important in our lives, but our true home is found in God." He would write in his confessions: "For Thou hast made us for thyself – and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

The well-known psychiatrist Dr. Gerald C. May observed after countless years of listening to the deepest yearnings of people's hearts, "I am convinced that human beings have an inborn desire for God. Whether we are consciously religious or not – this desire is our deepest longing and most precious treasure."

Did you know that the Bible is only 3 chapters along in its great story when we discover the reason for our homelessness – or home sickness? Yes, the Bible teaches the homelessness of every soul.

This yearning for home and peace is the result of our fallen condition. We had a home. It was perfect in every way – but we were expelled from it. Because of Adam’s rebellion and ours – we have lived East of Eden ever since.

Some of the great saints of the faith – like Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and Isaiah – realized that our truest home was found in our relationship to God. In **Hebrews 11:13-16** we read, “Each one of these people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home. If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back anytime they wanted. But they were after a far better country than that – heaven country. You can see why God is so proud of them, and has a City waiting for them.”¹

John Bunyan wrote in his spiritual classic **PILGRIM’S PROGRESS**, “As I walked through the wilderness of this world . . .” We say that this world is a wilderness – not to diminish its splendor – but to be reconciled to our transient status.”²

The reason that the homing instinct becomes so very real at Christmas is because at Christmas God provides a way back home for us. As Chesterton wrote:

“For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
They lay their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.”

At Christmas God declares, ‘Please come home.’ In order for us to come home – God had to send his only son to earth to become homeless.

The Christmas hymn, **“Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne,”** expresses this truth:

“Thou didst leave Thy throne - And Thy kingly crown
When Thou camest to earth for me.
But in Bethlehem’s home - Was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.”

Yes, Chesterton continues:

“A child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam,
Only where he was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost – how long ago! -
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky’s dome.”

So, the rescue mission began – “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”³

The great beauty of the Christmas message is that God has provided a way out of our exile. God declares, ‘Please come back home. I have personally provided a way back. It began in Bethlehem. Into this world of darkness – a great light has come.’ Even when darkness tries to extinguish the light – it is to no avail. There is more grace in God than sin in us.

The late Methodist missionary – Dr. E. Stanley Jones – because of his missionary work and travels – spent a great deal of time away from his family. The missionary’s son was once asked what he would like most for Christmas. The son without hesitation said, “**I would like my father to step out of that picture frame – and be here with me.**” That is the cry of the human heart.

In Jesus Christ – God has placed his own picture and imprint into every nook and cranny of the face of the earth inviting us to come back home – regardless of what we have done. All is forgiven. That is why the Christmas message can never be erased. This homing instinct cannot be denied. Until we accept the great gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ – all other gifts will be a poor substitute.

The gifted spiritual writer – Fred Buechner – has written four novels featuring the Reverend Leo Bebb – a unique evangelist with a checkered past. In the novel, **LOVE FEAST**, Leo decides to give a Thanksgiving meal for everybody in the town who is a nobody – and has nowhere else to go. Right before the meal is served, Leo shares these words: “The kingdom of God is like a great feast – a love feast where no one is a stranger.” He further shares, “We all got secrets, you know. We have hurtful things. Long ago things. We’re all scared and lonely. Most of the time we hide these things. We are so lost – we don’t even know which way home is. We are scared to ask. It is about time we declare we are lost. We would find out our home is Jesus Christ.”⁴ Yes, Jesus declares the best home of all is not the one behind us – but the one ahead of us. That home is called the kingdom of God – and we are all invited. **Please come.**

Yes, God – the God revealed in Jesus Christ – is the One we hunger for above all the hungers and appetites we have.

We know from the Parable of the Prodigal Son – that the elder son was surrounded by his father’s home and presence all the time – but never claimed it – or lived in its power and presence. The house is not our home – Christ is. Christ must be ‘at home’ in our hearts. The Father is our dwelling place.

Yes, that ache – that longing in our hearts – that deep longing for home is the most important desire of all.

Follow this homing instinct. Please come home!

“To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be – and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.”⁵

Please come home.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
December 21, 2008
10:00 a.m. combined service
All rights reserved – Copyrighted 12-21-08

ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE: The New Testament in Contemporary English**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1993, second printing, page 472.

² R. Maurice Boyd, **PERMIT ME VOYAGE**, Welch Publishing Company, Inc., 1989.

³ NIV, John 1:14-15.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, **LOVE FEAST IN THE BOOK OF BEBB**, New York: Atheneum, 1979, page 306.

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, **“The House of Christmas,”**