

“ARE YOU GOING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS?”

“And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city...”

Luke 2:3

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This sermon belongs in some measure to some wonderful friends in the Royal Burgh of St. Andrews, Scotland - in the Kingdom of Fife, widely heralded as the Home of Royal and Ancient Golf Club. The oldest Scottish University is also there, founded in 1413, where the venerable John Knox studied prior to the Reformation. Less importantly, it is also, less importantly, my Alma Mater.

In the years when I was completing my Graduate Studies, as early December approached, friends began to ask us, "Are you going home for Christmas?" Even in dour Scotland, where Christmas is more of a quiet, family sacred holiday, and much less "a festival of consumption," as Daniel Boorstin called ours; it just seemed natural that Christian people should be home at Christmastide. I suppose I have heard the question ten thousand times since, but in the corridors of my mind it still lingers back there on the chilly banks of the old North Sea: "Are You Going Home for Christmas?"

I heard a touching echo of it the other day in a TV interview of some young American marines over in Iraq. "Will you be going home for Christmas?" was the question. "Yeah, sure," the soldiers sallied back. I did read a while ago of the elated young soldier-father, who miraculously won a surprise Christmas leave, when his number came up on the lottery spinning wheel.

Then a ministerial friend was talking with me from up north. Before saying goodbye, he asked me to pray for his wife. "Why?" I asked, "something wrong?" "No," he said, but this will be the first year that son will not be home for Christmas." Then, I overheard some college students chatting at lunch one day. I tried not to eavesdrop, but I kept hearing in one form or another, "Hey, Charlie, are You Going Home for Christmas?" "Oh yes, are you?" "No, I have to work; "Maybe. I'm trying." One overseas student opined that it was impossible. Another said something like, "I don't know where home is anymore." A sentence which thunders throughout the land of time and chance and family change.

Where is home to you anyway? I have found in questioning people through this week around Sharon Church that the question draws up a certain sentiment. One fine gal responded that "Home is still in Tennessee, where else?" Even though she and her family have lived in Charlotte for over 30 years. Home is where the heart is, or is it the memories of things that used to be? And "I'll be home for Christmas." is still a favorite Holiday song: Are You Going Home for Christmas?

"Yes" is the answer, (turn the page) if you catch it in the prelude to the Christmas story in the Gospel of Luke. "And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." (what else is new?) And Joseph also went up to the City which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David," a newer translation puts it, "because that was his home." (Luke 2) In those days, it actually happened; in these days I ask you, "Are You Going Home for Christmas. Let's look at it three ways.

One, are you going home? I mean you literally, to your house, to your family, to those who love you and need you, not just in body, but in body, mind and soul. There is only one place where you are irreplaceable. You are the only father or mother to your children. The only place where no one else can take your place is right there. There are other places where you are important, even essential, but this is number one. Oh sure, maybe you are involved in a host of good things. That's nice. But someone else could do them all just about as well and aye, they someday will. Oh, of course you are important to your company; perhaps you are a big man/woman at the office. You might think you are secure, but I remember the day in 1961, the first year of my ordained ministry, when they sent down an executive order in the Big Steel Corporation in Pittsburgh: "Cut all department personnel 10% by January 15th", and they cut them one by one. And I watched and pastored family after family as it all

slipped downward for a score of years. It might be difficult for awhile, but soon enough someone else could take your position, and, aye, they someday will.

In my retirement, such as it was become my flirtation with you good people at Sharon Church, I had been mulling over the details of my personal journey –where did the days and decades go? I have no real regrets. I made all my own decisions. But since we moved to Charlotte five years ago, I realize more acutely how precious is the gift of my dear Peggy and our daughters and our son in law and our two grandchildren.

So forgive me if I linger too long on this family item. I know it might be hard to bear for those of you who do not have your family anymore, or maybe things are in flux just now. But in all the years I dived so completely into my ministry, I worry now that I short-changed my children. Things were different; men were supposed to support the family and make decisions. Ministers preached sermons all over the place which told the Man that he was head of the house. Oh our children turned out fine, more than fine: thanks to their mother and their own hard work, but still I think about it. In the decades of being a pastor, I never heard anyone wish at the end of the road, that they had spent more time at the office, or on the job, or even on a better round of golf. No, the regrets universally are about broken relationships and the things they never got around to.

I remember the story of the little English girl whose house was bombed during World War II. All their trinkets, toys, furnishings, their photographs, their clothes -everything they valued was gone. A neighbor was sympathizing and said, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Janie, that you lost your home!" Little Janie responded in a flash, "Oh, no, we haven't lost our home. We just have to find another house to put it in." Repeat, you are the only father to your children; the only husband to your wife; the only wife to your husband; you are the only children

your parents will ever have, however old or young you are. The only irreplaceable part we have is the personal relationships of our lives.

When I was leaving my last church, it just happened that the moving truck came one day and emptied my Study while I was out to lunch, a long lunch-hour I confess to say goodbye to my staff. When I got back they were already finished. All the boxes and books and trinkets were on the truck and gone. I was reminded of a short story John Updike wrote of his moving day up in New England. When the truck was packed the movers asked him to look around inside to be sure nothing was forgotten. "I did," he wrote, "I wandered all through my house. Nothing was left behind. But it was a funny feeling with all my stuff out of it, my own house had forgotten all about me."

Sure, your family needs the nice things in life which only money can buy; the nice house, the good car, good schools, good club; and sure you have to work to get it (these days more than all the rest.) But if you gain the whole world and lose your own family, (soul the Bible says) the rest is not worth a tinker's dam!

I sigh, then kiss you (wrote the poet)
For I must own
That I shall miss you
When you have grown.

Shelley

One eminently successful mother said that "If you bungle the job of raising your children, it really doesn't matter what else you do well." If you destroy the simple love of a happy family, it doesn't matter what else you manage to build.

Maybe I'm unrealistic, idealistic. I don't know. I've been accused of both. Maybe it cannot happen anymore. Maybe the roots have been torn up out of the garden for too long. But you can try. You can go part of the way home by

flowers trampled over, overgrown with weeds, and the songbirds flown away. Once it was peace, now the hurt and arguments and loneliness and regrets. I know a couple who ruined Christmas last year in a fight over where to place the Christmas tree.

“Are You Going Home For Christmas?” Back deep down inside yourself, to that trysting place of the spirit? We will part our ways here, you and I. I to a modest home built by my father and his brothers on one of the hills overlooking the city. I used to sit and gaze out our attic window wondering if I would ever even get as far as the downtown I could see from up there.

Where do you go? Where was the home of your happiest Christmas? Was it out west, or down in Alabama, or up in Ohio, or Pennsylvania, or in Iredell, or Anson or out in Brunswick or Costal Carolina County, or here in Mecklenberg? “I drift back to the days when the children were young,” one mother told me. Another said, “Back when Tommy was still alive.” I know you cannot literally go back there. The road back is impassable. Teddy White wrote about the day he took a cab from Logan Airport to have a nostalgic Christmas look at his old neighborhood in Boston. At first, he could not even find his street, and when he eventually did, it was a run down wreck and he was afraid to go up to the door of his old house.

“But what should I do now? We have everything we want,” she said, “but we aren’t happy anymore.” We got confused...Then comes the whisper from Proverbs 4. “Better is a poor child, than a rich, old and foolish king. Better is a dry morsel in quiet than a houseful of feasting with strife.”

I shall never forget my friend named Bob from a former church, who came to me every Christmas with a little wad of money, saying “Rev, please give this to a family who is down on their luck this year.” I felt like Santa Claus. I asked him what prompted his generosity. He told me of the depression year when his own family had no money for presents for the family. “Somebody helped us,”

he said, "anonymously, so we had a nice Christmas dinner. And then we all sat down and cut pictures out of magazines of what we would have given if we had the money to do so. Then, we wrapped the pictures up in old Christmas paper. We wrote out little prayers for each other and placed them in the boxes under the tree. It wasn't much, but you know Dr. Cromie" he ended, "we all still say that was the greatest Christmas our family ever had! Christ came down to share his love with us."

Better is a broken down old stable in Bethlehem, than all the great Inns of the world. For something unique and eternally significant was lying in that manger. And the Christ-child invites you to come over and have a personal visit this Christmas. Bethlehem is the home-town for every one of us. (Take a minute and tell the Lord that you are willing to come again.)

You don't have to leave the house to leave the home. You don't have to travel far to be faraway from everything real and wonderful and enduring. Follow it from one job to the next, one party to the next, one drink to the next, one excitement to the next. Take it north or south. Travel east or west, and the same old person, with the same old problems travels along, dogging you step by step, tugging at your coat-tails to remind you that you cannot run away from yourself.

That's the way it was with the poor prodigal son, starving to death over there in that home-made pig-sty in a far away land. The New English Bible says, "He came to his senses" and set out for home, to the big old house at the top of the hill. And the theme returns, "Are You Going Home for Christmas?"

Of course you don't have to go anywhere; you can always stay over the way you are, imbedded in the compromises we all tend to make, hanging onto your sad story of what you have lost or given up, or what was taken from you. Sure you can, but why would you? Why would you give up the extraordinary

divine.” The experiment is over. The search for God is gone: in Jesus Christ he’s here; Christ came home at Christmas. The one who made the starry heavens came down in human form to chat with us. How absolutely astounding!

Through Christ, God understand what it is that you and I are up against. He knows what it is like to live, to be caught up in mixed motives and emotional tangles. He knows what it’s like when we get discouraged that the world is not as it is supposed to be. He knows what it is like to be poor and outcast. He knows the disappointment when other people let you down, and they often do. They broke his heart too, and all he tried to do was help them! “Tempted in every way” the Bible says, “yet He remained obedient.” He kept his end of the bargain even though we don’t and can’t, not without him.

The first Christmas story began when Joseph was called to go home. And he took Mary with him, she being great with child. The decree said it was time to go back. I have no decree from Caesar Augustus in hand to order you back. But Christ is inviting you and me to come, to where we belong and where we ought to be. In those days most everyone missed it; their eyes were on Rome or in Herod’s Palace at Jerusalem, or they were preparing for some holiday celebration. It came and went and they were unfazed: they missed it. I don’t want you to miss it today.

In those days, but in these days, as our Christmas week begins, with all the glorious music, fun and family celebrations still ahead of us, a decree goes out from the pulpit of Sharon Presbyterian Church, that all of you should go home, each to the place where he/she belongs. To let the story unfold its own power and peace in our present lives and let Christ be born in your hearts anew. Because, if that doesn’t happen, not much else matters for you on this Christmas season.

In these days, a decree from God himself (What ever happened to Augustus Caesar anyway?) an invitation to enlarge the vision, to put down anchor again to the one secure and eternal harbor, to throw ourselves on the mercy of God, to go out of the pew into the world, to live and share his love. (Are you listening?) And, the theme returns a final time: Are You Going Home For Christmas? I hope your answer is "Yes, here I am Lord, back home. And I promise to keep Christmas in my heart and remain there, for now and forevermore. Amen.