

## Coming Home

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Eve 1993. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Tonight, millions of people are coming home for Christmas. They're traveling by car. They're flying in planes. They're riding trains and buses. They're hitchhiking. They're coming home. They're coming home for Christmas. A marine corporal hasn't been home for a year. He's flying home from Somalia to spend a few days with mom and dad. Five college girls cram into an old Ford Mustang and fly down the Pennsylvania Turnpike to be with brothers, sisters, mom and dad tomorrow morning. Three infants sleep in the back seat of a station wagon as mom and dad tool down the road to grand-mom's house. Uncle Albert, whose wife died six months ago, has been invited to his daughter's home for Christmas. Millions of men and women are coming home for Christmas.

Robert Frost wrote someplace that -

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in."

But that's not always so. Jake and Carol can't go home. It's been three years since they got married but mom and dad still can't accept Jake. They'll celebrate Christmas with friends, but it's not the same as coming home. Jim lives out in Minnesota. He hasn't been home for five Christmases. That's when he told his mom and dad he's gay. His mom wants him to come home but his dad says, "No way! He's no son of mine." Alec's parents got divorced not long after he left for college. He no longer has a home. Many of us feel we can't go home again.

The Christmas story addresses our longing to come home. The Christmas story

addresses our fear of not being able to go home. Jesus was born homeless so that we might come home to God. In the birth of Jesus, God left home to go into the far country to find his prodigal sons and daughters and bring them home. No matter who you are - or what you've done - Jesus Christ says to you, "Come home!" Young or old, you have a home. Rich or poor, you have a home. Strong or weak, you have a home. Married, single, divorced, gay or straight, God comes to us in Jesus to lead us home.

We don't always hear that Good News in our churches. We Christians are imperfect people. We often resist telling others the Good News God has entrusted to us. Sometimes we give the impression that God doesn't welcome some people. Sometimes it's not even an impression. Sometimes we, in fact, don't welcome all people. Sometimes we don't even know how to welcome <sup>some</sup> ~~all~~ people. Forgive us if we've so distorted the Good News. Forgive me when I give the impression that you're not welcome in God's family. God entered our world in Jesus to lead us home.

In his article "Returning to Church", which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* several years ago, novelist Dan Wakefield described his own coming home to God's family. It was a treacherous time in his life. A long-standing relationship with a woman had just dissolved. He was out of money, and had just buried, within the span of seven months, both of his parents. His work no longer satisfied him, and drugs had become an attractive way to escape. "I was," he wrote, "headed for the edge of a cliff." A chance conversation in a neighborhood

bar with a house painter, who was looking for a place to go to church on Christmas Eve, led to Wakefield's own attendance at a Christmas Eve service. He began to participate in other services of worship and Bible studies. He began to feel more and more at home. He experienced a growing freedom from his sense of drifting purposelessness and from what he called "my assortment of life-numbing addictions."<sup>4</sup>

Tonight you've come home to your Father's house. Some of you've come with family and friends. Some of you've come alone. A few may not know anyone around you. I hope you'll feel drawn in <sup>to</sup> the family of Jesus. This is your home. This is your true home - God's family. Jesus came to give us all a welcome we can't earn and the assurance of a joyful acceptance in the Father's home.

**God of grace, no one is beyond the reach of your love, or outside your limitless mercy. Give us your Spirit to welcome with affection all people. Give each one of us confidence in your parental love so we may all find a home in your family of faith, with brothers and sisters who follow Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.**

<sup>4</sup>Based on the article as described by Thomas Long, Shepherds and Bathrobes, "What do you mean, 'Repent'?", p. 19.

## Pastoral Prayer

Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

Response: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Good and gracious God, on this holy night you gave us your Son, the Lord of the universe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Savior of all, lying in a manger. On this holy night draw us into the mystery of your love. Join our voices with the heavenly host that we may sing your glory on high. Give us a place among the shepherds that we may find the one for whom we have waited, Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.