

I'll Be Home For Christmas

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Eve 1988. 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 have come home for Christmas. Some have traveled thousands of miles just to be with friends and family tonight and tomorrow. And yet even if we have managed to come home for Christmas we discover so often that home and the reunion isn't quite as good as we hoped. All too often there's something or someone that disappoints. For many people the universal desire for a good family Christmas turns into unrealistic expectations. We all want everything to be perfect but it never is. We want to go home to relatives magically transformed into the people we've always wanted them to be. We want past difficulties to be instantly resolved. And we want the whole experience to equal our happiest daydreams.

And for every one who has come home for Christmas there are so many others who can't go home. I think, tonight, of the hundreds of thousands of homeless Armenians. I think of the, perhaps, millions of homeless people in our own nation. I think, also, of the families and friends of those men and women who were killed in the air crash in Lockerbie, Scotland. For so many, Christmas is a time of pain and separation and loss.

The two Christmases exist side by side, the happy and the sad. Tomorrow morning a five year old child will wake up giggling at 5 A.M. All the joy she's capable of understanding lies wrapped and waiting under the Christmas tree. Tomorrow a young woman will receive an engagement ring. Tonight an elderly couple eagerly anticipates the long-awaited Christmas reunion with their five children and flocks of grandchildren.

But right next door to someone's happiness, an unemployed father can't see joy in his five-year-old's face. A young, single mother must face the awful task of putting gifts under the tree alone. An elderly couple page through a tattered photo album, haunted by the ghost of Christmases past.

I don't like to think about these unhappy situations at Christmas time. But how wrong it is to see them as intrusions at Christmas. If we let them, they can help us understand what Christmas means. God didn't come to a perfect world; he came to a world that suffers. He came to our world *because* it suffers. Christmas doesn't deny sorrow its place in the world or in our hearts. But the message of Christmas is that joy is bigger than despair, that peace will conquer war, that God's all conquering love has begun to crush all the evil, hatred, and pain the world at its worst can muster. God, in Jesus, has established a foothold on the mainland of a rebellious planet and is going to finally liberate us all. This is the truth that creates hope for a troubled marriage or a hungry child. It dries the tears of loneliness. It negates the sting of death. It gives the single mother strength to place those gifts under the tree and to live on.

Above all, the message of Christmas is that we really can come home for Christmas, not only in our dreams, but in reality because God is our home. We sing about it in our hymns,

O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.

God is our eternal home. When you were baptized, whether as a little baby or as an adult, you became a member of God's family. When you were confirmed you acknowledged God as your Father and Jesus as your Lord.

And tonight you've come home to your Father's house once again. The majority of us, whatever our present beliefs or unbeliefs may be, have our roots in the Christian tradition. And the message of Christmas is, Welcome Home! The Good News is that you have a home. You have a family. Whether you're married or divorced, whether you're old or young, whatever your lifestyle may be, you have a home. You have a Father in Heaven. You have a mother. You have brothers and sisters.

But Christmas also tells us that God doesn't wait for us to come home. Christmas speaks, not so much of our coming home to the Father, but of God leaving home to live with us in our homes and towns. The Advent of Jesus was the coming of God to his human family. God, in Christ, became homeless so he might lead us home. He came to give us a forgiveness we can't earn, and the assurance of a joyful acceptance in the Father's home. This is the Good News. Welcome home! You *can* come home for Christmas. Come home-- God, in Christ, is waiting to greet you.

Let us pray:

Christ, born in a stable, give courage to the homeless.
Christ who fled to Egypt, comfort the refugee.
Christ you fasted in the desert, have mercy on the hungry.
Christ who hung in torture on the cross, pity those in pain.
Christ who died to save us, above all forgive our sin, our greed, our selfishness, our unconcern, and bring us all home to your Father's mansion and the feast he has prepared for us. Amen.