

“I’LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS”
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Luke 2:1-20

One year, a woman was so caught up in getting everything done for Christmas - shopping, wrapping, decorating, baking - that she completely forgot about sending Christmas cards. In a panic, on December 23rd, she raced to the store, found a box of cards that she liked - they had a beautiful, peaceful, serene picture of Bethlehem on them - raced back home, got out her Christmas card list, and went at it. Quickly she wrote the addresses on the envelopes, then stuck on her return address label. Quickly she opened them up, wrote the recipients’ name at the top and then her name at the bottom. Quickly she sealed them.

Then she jumped in her car, raced to the post office, bought a pile of those beautiful nativity stamps, went over to the counter and slapped the stamps on them, and then, with a huge sigh of relief, she went over to the slot on the wall and mailed them. Phew! Done! That was close.

With that huge burden off of her shoulders, she drove home, made a cup of tea for herself and sat down at the kitchen table. There on the table was one of the cards - she had had one left over. There had been fifty cards, and she had forty-nine people on her list. So she picked up the card and was admiring its beauty, and then, she opened it up - and for the first time, to her horror, read what it said on the inside: “A gift is on the way!” Yikes!

Oh, the things we do to ourselves to try to have the perfect Christmas - to get everything just right! There’s a romance about this holiday. Thoughts of Christmas evoke warmth and love and togetherness and belonging. That’s why the old classic song, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” is sung so much and means so much and touches us deeply. We want to be in a place where we are loved and cared for, where we belong, where we matter, where we’re together with those who matter to us.

If you’ve been around here during Advent, you know that I’ve been preaching a series of sermons called “Expect the Unexpected” - about the surprising and unexpected ways God is at work in the world. Well, tonight’s sermon is no exception, because there’s a surprise tonight too - and the surprise is this: No matter where you are tonight, you are home for Christmas. No matter if your physical home is here or a thousand miles away . . . no matter if your relatives are

sitting next to you or around the world . . . you are home for Christmas.

Why? Because God has brought you there in the birth of Christ. When God bridged the gap between Himself and humanity that we caused over and over again through the gift of His only begotten Son, He brought us home. As the Rev. Mark Dunn put it, “Christmas is homecoming, the end of our exile, that time when the babe at Bethlehem is a sign that the dwelling of God is with His people, and we are brought, by the grace of God, back to our true home, with God.”

“Because we could not find our way home, God made His home with us - through a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem.”

So tonight, we’re all home for Christmas - right where we belong by the grace of God through the birth of Jesus. And friends, our home in Christ is a very special place.

It’s special, first of all, because this home where we live because of Jesus’ birth is a place where each of us matters, each of us is noticed. In Jesus’ birth, God says to every single one of us, “I love you so much, I care about you so much, I notice what’s going on in your life so much” that I came to earth to be with you and watch over you and save you.

There’s a woman named Sharon who could tell you about being at home at Christmas - that kind of home. Sharon was a single mom a number of years ago, and she was really struggling. She was raising two small children alone without any child support or help from her ex-husband. To make matters worse, she got laid off from her job in November. So on a grim night in December, she had to sit her children down and tell them that there wouldn’t be any presents that Christmas. They were heartbroken, and so was Sharon.

Being a proud woman, she kept it all to herself. She didn’t want anyone to know how rough things were for her and her children. Then, on December 20th, she remembers the date exactly, her phone rang and a voice said “This is the North Pole and we have a message from Santa for you.” Well, Sharon thought it was a crank call and she slammed the phone down in disgust.

It rang again. “Please don’t hang up, this really is the North Pole and we have a message for you . . . aren’t you the mother of Amy and Randy?” Shocked, Sharon said, “Who is this?” The voice said, “Santa doesn’t allow us to tell our names, but he wants you to have this message - be at Bud’s TV at 12 noon on December 22nd.” “What for?” Sharon asked. “Just be there and come alone, live the children home. Merry Christmas!” Click. The line went dead.

Well, Sharon was totally befuddled, and still didn’t believe it, and because

she didn't have a babysitter or money to pay a babysitter, she decided to forget about it.

The next day there came a knock at her door, and when she and the kids answered it, there stood a beautiful Christmas tree - all by itself - nobody nearby, no tracks in the snow, no nothing. The kids squealed with delight - and the three of them dragged it in the house, pulled out their ornaments and decorated it beautifully.

The next day was December 22nd. At 12:30 p.m. the phone rang. Sharon answered it. "This is the North Pole, Sharon, and you didn't come to Bud's TV." She told them that she hadn't felt up to it. "Please Sharon, please come to Bud's TV, Santa is waiting for you."

So she did. She made her way over to Bud's TV and there was greeted by some kind people who led her to a room where boxes were stacked, filled with presents - clothes, shoes, hats, mittens, boots, toy - all for them! She started to cry, and couldn't stop.

One of the people said, "Oh, that's not all Santa has for you." There were boxes filled with food - a canned ham, a turkey, bread, vegetables, fruit - everything they needed. All Sharon could do was cry.

The people told her to go home and after the children had gone to bed, some of them would bring all the gifts and food over to her house - which they did. And it turned out to be the most special Christmas Sharon ever had. (Turns out, by the way, that a group in her town, Detroit, Michigan, called The Goodfellows had found out she was in trouble, and they're the ones that stepped in and gave them a Christmas they would never forget.)

In so many different ways, Sharon and her children were home for Christmas - home because they mattered, home because somebody noticed. That's the home that was built when Jesus was born.

But it's also a home where you're never forgotten. When God sent His Son into the world, He said to each and everyone of us, "No matter what, I love you, I know you, and you are never away from my heart - no matter where you are."

Friends, this world can be a harsh and lonely place. People can be tremendously mean to each other, and hurt each other. It's easy to feel lost and alone, and far away from others. It's easy to feel like you don't matter to anyone, that you've been forgotten. It's easy in this overly busy, hyper-scheduled, frenetic world to get lost in the shuffle.

But not in God's home. Not in the home God created through His Son. In that home, we are never, ever forgotten, not for one minute, no matter what's going on, no matter where we are.

There are some very important people who know that in a literal way this Christmas time. They are troops serving in Iraq, and right now, some of them are holding in their hands phone cards that we sent to them. I was absolutely astonished this week to get an email from Iraq - directly from a chaplain in the field in Iraq - and it's a friend of mine, from this Annual Conference. Her name is Sherrol James, and of all the millions of phone cards that were sent in this year, our phone cards went to her troops stationed in Iraq, and she wrote an email to me to thank our church. Those troops are far away from the home where they dearly want to me tonight, but let me tell you something, friends, they are home for Christmas because of Jesus Christ. They are home in the arms of God, and they're able to call their families because of the gift we sent them. Home is where you're never forgotten.

And finally, the home God gave us through the birth of Jesus is a home where you're safe and where you're saved. In the song we hear the words "Christmas Eve will find me where the lovelight gleams" - well, friends, the lovelight is the saving grace of Jesus Christ, and when we claim that grace we are home.

Which takes me to a final story. A woman by the name of Jeanie Williams was Christmas shopping for her children, but she really wasn't in the mood. She was depressed, actually, because shockingly, her parents were divorcing after nearly 40 years of marriage. So she was pretty much just going through the motions as she wandered through the store aisles in search of gifts that year.

One night, while walking down an aisle in a store, she came upon a nativity scene, that was strewn all over the place, the characters were laying all over the aisle. As she stooped to pick it up, she heard a mother in the next aisle scolding her daughter. Evidently, the child had picked something up off the floor and popped it into her mouth - and so the mother was yelling at her. Well, the little girl protested, insisting that she hadn't put it into her mouth, she was just kissing it. "It" turned out to be the figure of the baby Jesus, probably the same figure that went with the nativity set that Jeanie was then holding in her hands.

As Jeanie watched the mother and daughter, she figured out that they were pretty poor, and as she continued to watch she heard the little girl beg her mother to buy the figurine. Suddenly, the mother got down on her knees and with tears streaming down her face, she hugged her daughter and explained that she couldn't

afford to buy it this year.

And then, very tenderly, the little girl patted her mother's back, and said, "That's okay Mommy, I don't need the baby Jesus doll really. My Sunday School teacher says that I've got Jesus in my heart." A moment later, they stood up and walked on.

Well, as quickly as she could, Jeanie gathered everything up and ran to the cash register to pay for the nativity scene, all the while explaining to the clerk that she wanted her to catch the mother and child on the way out and give them the little Jesus doll.

And you know what? To this day there is a nativity set in Jeanie Williams' house with no Jesus in it. But it doesn't matter, because Jesus is there - in Jeanie's heart.

Home is where you're safe and where, most of all, you're saved.

Tonight, everyone, everywhere, can sing with gusto, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," because we are, friends, we are. Because of the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem, we are home. God has brought us home. Thanks be to God.

Amen.