

The Journey Home

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*“I’ll be home for Christmas
You can plan on me
Please have snow and mistletoe
And presents on the tree.”*

No need for me to sing the song—no doubt you’ve been hearing it in the shopping malls since say, Halloween. But as that song goes, I’ll be home for Christmas. Well, technically the day **after** Christmas. On December 26, I’ll travel to the town in which I was raised. Randy and I will take our three children and drive the 4-hour journey to Ridgway, Pennsylvania, where my parents still live. The mistletoe will be lacking, and my mom didn’t put up a tree this year. But we will have snow, that’s for certain. We’ll squeeze into my parents’ tiny living room to exchange presents. We’ll consume many more cookies than a person should in one 24-hour-period, which will make the tiny living room seem tinier. My parents will deeply appreciate the time they’ll have with their only grandchildren. And we will be but one of a multitude of extended families who journey to gather together to celebrate.

Perhaps some of you are going “home for Christmas.” In his book, *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor writes about the inexorable pull that the idea of “home” has on many of us at Christmas. He writes,

“... Christmas exerts powerful forces. We turn a corner in a wretched shopping mall and some few bars of a tune turn a switch in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows, and we get in our car and go back, like salmon.”

Sorry to compare us to smelly fish, but it’s true there are traditions we yearn for, wait all year for, and we will bask in them like a cat in a puddle of sunshine: Grandma’s pumpkin pie. Eggnog in those pretty little cups. The old Lionel train set coursing its way through the living room. Your favorite ornament, front and center on the tree. Many of us long to be “home for Christmas.”

Yet, it’s also true the sugary sentimentality of that song may deny the reality of our actual experience. Maybe where you are celebrating isn’t exactly “home.” Are you journeying to a **different** location this year? Has the configuration of that gathering changed? Are you part of a

new family? Or, is there an empty chair at the dining room table—the place where a loved one used to sit? Have you recently moved to a new town, a new job? Are you spending Christmas alone? Do you have memories of your so-called “home” that are terribly unhappy? Are your present concerns—be they financial or health-related—such that this Christmas offers little in the way of contentment? Or, is this the first time you’ve ever walked in our church doors, a place many of us do indeed call “home” but which may be strange and unfamiliar to you? Who’s to say where home is any more?

I suppose I **could** say I am going home for Christmas. Except that Ridgway no longer **seems** like home to me. Not really. My parents moved out of my childhood home years ago. In fact, I’ve never celebrated Christmas in the house in which they currently live. For nearly a score of years, Mom and Dad have journeyed here to celebrate Christmas with us. And while some things never change in the small town of Ridgway, the stark change in my parents’ health over the last years makes my visit up there seem less like going home and more like facing a new, challenging reality.

But just think of the new, challenging reality for Joseph and Mary! When we come upon them in our Gospel story this evening, they are **not** on their way home. Quite the contrary. Rather, they are busy traveling **away from** their home. A census for taxation purposes has been decreed throughout the Roman Empire, and Joseph is on his way “home”—to the place of his ancestors, a little town called Bethlehem, which is not really Joseph’s home at all. Trust me—once he and Mary, his betrothed, arrive there, it won’t be as if old pals from the neighborhood will shout out, “Hey, Joe—long time, no see! What’s the carpentry business like these days? And how about you introduce me to that pretty little lady of yours?”

No, Joseph and Mary are leaving behind the familiarity of family and friends in their Nazareth neighborhood to journey to his ancestors’ village because the Big and Powerful and Demanding Roman Empire says so. Nothing that empire likes better than to swagger with its self-ordained authority. Nothing that empire likes better than to shout “Jump” and watch the little people jump. Move ‘em here, move ‘em there, increase their taxes, draft them into the army. **That’s** how our story opens up this night. Joseph and Mary will journey somewhere—at a time that is not the best time for a very pregnant Mary to travel—and it will be somewhere that is **not home**. They go somewhere where they know no one. And no one knows them. As if the baby’s miraculous conception was not challenging enough. As if those surprising angel visitants to Mary didn’t make everything around them—including even their home in Nazareth—seem strange and unfamiliar. Who’s to say where “home” is anymore?

And yet, for all the strangeness of the circumstances in which Joseph and Mary find themselves, a home is made for them on **this** night. You see, where **Jesus** is, Luke tells us, **is home**. In the midst of all the uncertainties of life, Mary gives birth to her first-born son. She and Joseph cradle Jesus in their arms, gently lay him in a manger, and hover around him on that first night together. It is **Jesus** who provides the center for their life. It is **Jesus** who becomes their home. The angel visitant said as much, when he promised Mary months earlier that her child was, in fact, the Son of God, and he would be great, and his kingdom would have no end. And so, in a stable, which might seem like no home at all, a home is made for Joseph and Mary, a place to which they are drawn, a hearth around which they are gathered, a gift for which they have yearned: Jesus Christ himself.

Only Jesus is not home just for them. He is home for us. Remember, the angel told the astounded shepherds that there was good news that night—good news of great joy for all people. **All people. For us** a child has been born. **To us** a Son has been given. All the authority of God rests on his shoulders. All the love of God abides in him and pours out of him. It is that combination of just authority and holy love that makes Jesus a power to be reckoned with. Not a power that seeks to dominate, shouting “Jump” and watching us jump. But, instead, a gentle, self-giving rule of mercy and goodness that shows us how to **be**, and creates a space, a home where we—God’s children—finally and truly belong. No matter the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the path you and I walk these days, it has led us here. God’s arms are wide open to receive us and cradle us. Welcome home. **AMEN.**