

Christmas Eve (11 PM)  
December 24, 2009  
Text: Luke 2:1-20

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Portland, Oregon

There is something peaceful and renewing about coming to worship on Christmas Eve. It may be cold outside, but inside it feels warm, and the light from the candles casts a comfortable glow. We sing the familiar songs and hear the familiar story about Mary and Joseph making their way to Bethlehem, about Mary giving birth in the stable and naming her baby Jesus, about the angels and the shepherds and the mystery of this night. It's a story you may know by heart, and it's wonderfully comforting to hear it again. It's almost as if we return to the manger each Christmas Eve, and it feels a bit like a kind of coming home.

It doesn't matter whether you grew up in this congregation, or this is the first time you've walked through these doors. It doesn't matter whether you actually have come home for Christmas, or maybe you won't be going anywhere this year, or maybe there really isn't a home to go to any more. As we hear the story of Jesus' birth, this familiar story becomes a kind of home for our imaginations to settle into. And through the Christmas promise we do come home to a place where we belong, a place where there is room for us and a welcome for us.

I wonder, then, what we should make of the fact that for Mary and Joseph and their new-born boy, the stable with the manger and the hay wasn't home. It was just a stopping place. There was no room in the inn that night, and the stable was the only place to get in out of the cold. But soon enough, the family would be moving on. And for that matter, even though Nazareth became Jesus' home as he grew to adulthood, he finally left it, traveling from town to town to share good news that God's kingdom was near, and God's arms were open to all.

Maybe it tells us something important about being Christian, about belonging to Jesus and being part of his loving work for the world. Once, to a person who wanted to follow him, Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but I am someone who has no place to lay my head." Jesus didn't have one specific place to call home. Instead, with God as Father, the whole wide world could be home, and every person could be a child of God, a sister or a brother. In Jesus' eyes, no person is an outsider. Everyone is invited to be part of God's family.

A friend of mine served for years in the Air Force. He and his family moved more times than they could keep track of. A couple of years here, a couple of years there, then off to Germany, Korea, back to the states, and then off to

somewhere else. He really knew how to pack. But he also knew how to unpack—not just the boxes, but to unpack emotionally, to settle into each new place and let it become a home. One of the most important things was finding a church. They weren't looking for a perfect church, since heaven knows there really isn't any such thing. Instead, they were looking for a community that would receive them and give them a place to be strengthened in faith, where they could use their gifts and abilities in ways they felt God was calling them to be part of God's work of love for the world. He said that being in the Air Force taught him that anyplace could be home. Especially when he could find a community where people recognize the baby born in the manger as their Lord.

This year has brought so many changes for so many people. Some of us have experienced changes to our jobs, or our living situation. It may feel like things are shifting under our feet, as if everything we thought was permanent turned out to just be a temporary shelter. But whatever our circumstances may be, wherever we are, tonight we receive the promise of Christmas, that God has entered this world in a whole new way in the birth of Jesus. God has forever connected the human family to God's unending and eternal life. In Jesus, God makes a home with us, so that our permanent and forever shelter is with God.

Everything else in life may change—in fact, this holiday season seems to be a time when we are particularly aware of those changes we would not choose. We bring to Christmas our longings and hopes, and also our memories and losses. And our awareness that other people can never fully bear the burden of our needs, because human love is imperfect and limited and finite. But Christmas brings us love that is unlimited and infinite. God comes to make God's home with us. God's perfect love comes, not only in the baby Jesus born 2000 years ago, but here and now, to touch our lives and make us whole.

Because this newborn Savior has made us children of God, we can be at home everywhere, and we can recognize every person as a fellow child of God. We are a bit like Mary and Joseph leaving Bethlehem when their time at the stable was done. This place of worship tonight is a temporary stopping place for us. From here, we go out into a whole world that belongs to God. We go out blessed to be God's people, to live in Jesus' way of forgiveness and compassion and service, which is the truest home we'll ever know – at home with God, and God at home within us, and every person as sister or brother, related to us through God's deep love. May this Christmas vision fill us, body and soul, now and always. Amen