

## **Home for Christmas: 2. There's No Place Like Home**

**Luke 2:1-5 and John 1:14a**

**December 4, 2016**

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One of the things I love about this time of the year is the movies that come out. Among them the holiday movies with some heartwarming message. Have you ever seen a movie that made you cry? A movie where you were so drawn into the story and the actors were so real and believable that at some point in the story a moment touched you so deeply that the tears flowed. Something about that moment spoke to you – and you've never forgotten it. There's one movie that I've seen many times and every time I see it, there is one moment that brings me to tears. And that movie is *The Wizard of Oz*.

It is the story of a girl named Dorothy who lives in Kansas. She wakes up one day after a series of events and finds herself in this foreign land called Oz. And for the rest of the movie, she is trying to get back home to Kansas. The most emotional moment for me is near the end when Dorothy has finally found the wizard of Oz, and he is a hot air balloon, and if Dorothy will just climb into the basket with him, he will take her home. (Do you remember that moment?) "I'll take you back to Kansas," he says. And Dorothy is saying goodbye to all of the friends she has made in Oz. There is hugging and tears. This is the climactic moment when home is finally within reach, and she will be reunited with her family. But right at the moment she gets into the basket, her dog, Toto sees a cat. And what happens when a dog sees a cat? Toto jumps out of Dorothy's arms to chase the cat, and now Dorothy has a difficult decision to make. Do I stay in the hot air balloon and float back to Kansas without my dog, Toto? Or, do I stay in Oz and look for Toto and miss what may be my only opportunity to go home? That's the heart breaking moment every time I watch the movie. What if I could never go home? Or what if Dorothy was my child and she had to choose between her dog or going home? What would you do?

If you remember the movie, in that moment when the hot air balloon floats away without Dorothy and Toto, Glinda, the good witch appears and tells Dorothy that she has always had the power to go home any time she wanted. "All you have to do is click your heels together three times and repeat this phrase: There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home." And the next thing we see is Dorothy waking up as if it has all been a dream, and she is surrounded by her family. She is so happy! They, of course, don't believe her magical story of Oz. But the one thing that matters: There's no place like home.

Last week, we began this series, Home for Christmas. All of us have a deep longing for this place called home. In this season, some will come home. Some will go home. Some will long for what might have been or could have been and still wonder if it's possible. Home is the place where you are supposed to belong. Home is the place where you are supposed to feel safe. Home is the place where love is supposed to prevail. We want that. We long for that. Some know exactly where that place is. It's where relationships are found. Some of us know that place where we can gather around a table and share our lives and even when we disagree, we still belong, still feel safe, still find love. Others, like the young man in the opening video, are nervous to go there – not knowing what to expect. Are the same dynamics that hurt us still there?

A year ago, many of us read Tim Keller's book, *Prodigal God*. In it, he writes about home: "*Home is a powerful but elusive concept. The strong feelings that surround it reveals some deep longing within us for a place that absolutely fits and suits us, where we can be, or perhaps find*

*our true selves. Yet, it seems that no real place or actual family ever satisfies these yearnings, though many situations arouse them.”*

The Bible tells us we were created to live in a place like that. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we learn that God created a Garden, a place of paradise and in that place of paradise; God placed a man and a woman and gave them everything they needed to flourish, physically and spiritually. There was no sin, no shame, no death. And at the core of their existence was an intimate relationship with God. That was home. But do you remember what happened? Adam and Eve wanted their independence. They said, “We don’t need God. We want to live by our own rules. We want to be God.” And in the process, they lost the garden of paradise. And ever since, we find ourselves longing for that place where we can flourish. That’s the story of the rest of the Bible. God keeps offering this place called home. And in this season, we remember how God sent us Jesus to offer a place to call home. That home is found in relationship. The gospel of John announces: **The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.** (John 1:14a)

Something happens when God moves into the neighborhood. It’s called radical community. Two thousand years ago, there was a migration of people in this tiny nation called Israel. **Everyone went to their own town to register.** (Luke 2:3) Rome wanted to know many men lived in each region so taxes could be levied because Caesar Augustus needed more resources to fund his massive building program throughout the Roman Empire. So this teenaged couple, Mary and Joseph, walk for ten days from Nazareth which is Mary’s ancestral home to Bethlehem which is Joseph’s ancestral home. Our versions usually place a donkey in the scene so Mary could ride instead of walk, but that’s not in the Bible. They walked for ten days and by the way, Mary was nine months pregnant at a time when pregnancy and childbirth was a life-threatening experience.

The Christmas card version of this story says they came to Bethlehem, and they went to an inn where the innkeeper said, there is no room in the inn. But that’s not what Luke says. **While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.** (Luke 2:6-7)The Greek word is *kataluma*. It means “guest room”. They would have arrived in Bethlehem and gone to Joseph’s parent’s house, and no one let them in! There’s no place like home? That’s not what Mary and Joseph found. Nobody in the house looked at Mary and saw this a frightened, exhausted young woman ready to give birth and in need of a place to call home. She’s part of our family! Wouldn’t you volunteer to sleep in the barn so Mary could have your bed? What if that act would welcome God into the neighborhood? They needed radical community. Someone has said radical community is when I can walk into your house and go to your refrigerator and find something to eat. Nothing is off limits. That night God would move into the neighborhood and a home would be created when shepherds who had no home arrive to honor and welcome this child.

This is the season when we remember God sent Jesus to say “you belong – you are safe – you are loved.” God made home among us. God’s in the neighborhood. God is the connecting link meant to bind us together. When God has come home, God moves us to be the connecting link in the neighborhood.

A few years ago, Amanda and I made a trip to San Francisco and after seeing the sites in and around the city, we rented a car so we could see the redwood trees. North California and a small area in China are the only places in the world where you can see the giant redwoods.

These are trees that can live for thousands of years. They can grow to a height of 300 feet or more. It takes a group of people to be able to wrap their arms around one. We spend an afternoon walking through Muir Woods and it was amazing. You cannot plant a redwood tree in your yard and expect it to get to 300 feet – even if you had a couple thousand years to wait. A single redwood cannot survive. It's roots only go down 6-12 feet – and it would not take much of a storm to topple a tree like that. So how have the redwoods survived – some all the way back to the birth of Jesus? Redwood trees can only survive in community, beneath the surface their roots are interconnected and interwoven together. They literally hold each other up. I think we are supposed to be the redwoods in our neighborhoods. When God moves into our lives and creates a home within us, we become the connecting link out in our neighborhoods.

A year ago, I used this photo in a sermon. [photo] The news was filled with stories of people risking everything to cross the Mediterranean in order to escape war-torn regions and repressive governments. I cannot even imagine the sense of desperation that would risk everything – even risk your children's lives in order to save them. And then photos like this one of children washing up on the shore of Greece and Italy, it became something we could not ignore. [camera] And so we responded. Part of our Christmas offering went toward making health kits that UMCOR (crisis relief) distributes to refugees. And we moved out into the neighborhood [slide] to invite others to join us at Ridgedale Mall to put these kits together. [camera] And at the same time, there was a backlash in this country, fearing that terrorists would use this migration as a way to enter this country – and then a year ago this week an act of terror in San Bernardino by two people who professed allegiance to ISIS. 14 people were killed. And people were afraid and some used what had happened to target Muslims in this country with hateful words and actions. It even happened in the Twin Cities area. So I thought let's invite someone from the Islamic community right here in Plymouth to speak to us. And we did that on the Sunday after Christmas. Often we fear what we don't understand – and in this world it happens far too often that we marginalize people and attack them when we feel threatened. Then a group of women from this church began meeting together with women from the Islamic community and they invited others from the community and one thing they did was to assemble these health kits. In the past year, we assembled more than 2,000 of them. It's what can happen when God moves into the neighborhood.

The wave of refugees entering Europe has not been in the news much, but it continues. 290,000 people have crossed from North Africa to Italy so far this year in boats most of us wouldn't use to cross Lake Minnetonka. Thousands have died or gone missing in the process. And UMCOR is still responding, working with partners to provide food, basic needs, housing, and even these health kits. And at the same time, words and acts of hate in this country continue, targeting all sorts of individuals or groups that some think do not belong. And yet this is the season when we remember that God moved into the neighborhood. It's all about relationships, being the connecting link that proclaims belonging, safety, and love. I stand with you, and I stand against all that threatens you.

This week, it felt to me that in a world that is still broken in so many ways, we must be the connecting link showing that God is in the neighborhood. So, next month, we are going back into the community to invite Christians and Muslims and whoever will join us to make more of these health kits to send to refugees in search of a place to call home. And as we do this, we are proclaiming that God through Jesus has taken up residence within us and we will stand with those who hurt and stand against those who would push others away. This is the season when we remember that Jesus was and still is the answer to the need for home. God comes again, not to take us home but to create in us and through us the home our world is longing for. There is no place like home.

## Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 4, 2016

**Weekly Prayer:** Dear God, here I am, ready to listen for your voice. Help me to hear your timeless invitation to draw near to the child of Bethlehem. Make me truly ready to receive all that you have for me so that I can be fully available to share the joy of Jesus' birth to a world of need. Amen.

### Monday, December 5

#### **Scripture: Isaiah 63:7-9**

I will recount the LORD's faithful acts; I will sing the LORD's praises, because of all the LORD did for us, for God's great favor toward the house of Israel. God treated them compassionately and with deep affection. God said, "Truly, they are my people, children who won't do what is wrong." God became their savior. During all their distress, God also was distressed, so a messenger who served him saved them. In love and mercy God redeemed them, lifting and carrying them throughout earlier times.

**Observation:** Isaiah 63 used the Hebrew word *hesed* to express God's steadfast, covenant love, and the Hebrew *ahav* to show God's deeply-felt affection for God's people. Human feelings come and go, so in human love the more central the emotional, feeling aspect, the more changeable it tends to be. But God's love is strongly felt (*ahav*) yet also utterly dependable—it "endures forever" (Psalm 136).

**Application:** The first phrase of verse 9 revealed the feeling side of God's love: "During all their distress, God also was distressed." Grief, disappointment or struggle all tend to make us feel isolated, cut off, as though we alone are going through this hard time. How can it comfort and encourage you to remember that when you are distressed, God is also distressed for you and with you?

**Prayer:** Lord God, sometimes I imagine you as good, but in a cold, detached kind of way. Thank you for the prophet's message that you feel love for me, and for all of us, profoundly and caringly. Amen.

### Tuesday, December 6

#### **Scripture: John 3:16-17**

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

**Observation:** This is perhaps the most well-known text in the entire Bible. However, we do not often think of it as a passage that talked about the meaning of Advent and Christmas. Yet that's precisely what it did: it said that in Jesus, God expressed in a personal, redeeming way the depth of God's love for the whole world. God's love did not mean wishing the world well from afar. Instead, God's love led him to become one of us in the person of Jesus.

**Application:** It never occurred to Canaanites, Greeks or Romans to write about how much their gods like Baal, Zeus or Mars loved them. They usually thought their "gods" demanded sacrifices as a kind of bribe to get the god to send rain or protect them from harm. But God gave himself,

in Christ, as a sacrifice to save us, because God loves us. To which kind of God would you rather give your allegiance and service?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I'm often aware of an inner sense that I've blown it, that I deserve condemnation. But you came to save, not to condemn—thank you for your wonderful love. Amen.

### **Wednesday, December 7**

#### **Scripture: John 15:9-13 and Psalm 136:1-3**

“As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends.

Give thanks to the LORD because he is good. God's faithful love lasts forever! Give thanks to the God of all gods— God's faithful love lasts forever. Give thanks to the Lord of all lords— God's faithful love lasts forever.

**Observation:** Jesus spoke these yearning words to his disciples the night before he was crucified. He wanted them to understand that the cross was not an accident, a sad bungle that got him into trouble with the authorities. Giving himself on the cross expressed his deep love for them. Mark 14:26 said Jesus and the disciples ended their Passover supper by singing together. If they followed the usual practice, they sang Psalm 118, in which the first four verses, like Psalm 136, repeated that God's love endures forever.

**Application:** Jesus laid out what one writer calls “a triad of love” for the disciples. The Father loves me, Jesus said. In the same way, I have loved you. Now, as I have loved you, love one another. We often fall short of this ideal—but this kind of love is also willing to do the hard work of binding up wounds and pursuing reconciliation. How does it bring you comfort and strength to know Jesus' love for you is rooted in God's eternal love? How can we live out this kind of committed, steady love toward one another?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we sing a song that exclaims, in tones of wonder, “Oh, how he loves me so.” And it's not just a song—you really do love me, with a love capable of rocking my world. What a wonder that is! Amen.

### **Thursday, December 8**

#### **Scripture: 1 John 4:7-16**

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God

remains in us and we remain in God. We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

**Observation:** In this passage John repeated that “God is love.” All of us love someone or something at times (some of us more than others!). But John’s thought reached beyond that to say that the very essence of God’s being is love. “And how do you know that?” someone might have asked John. Advent pointed to the answer. We know God is love, John said, BECAUSE God sent his only Son into the world on a saving mission.

**Application:** We have the privilege of reflecting and sharing God’s love with one another. “No one has ever seen God,” he wrote. “If we love each other, God remains in us.” In what ways have other people been “God with skin on” in your life? Is there someone you know who God might be hoping to touch through your loving listening and caring?

**Prayer:** O God, this Advent season is full of tinsel, lights and gift-wrap. There none of that on the first Christmas – just your love, made flesh in a little baby, bringing us light and the gift of life. Amen.

## **Friday, December 9**

### **Scripture: Romans 5:1-8**

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God’s glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn’t often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

**Observation:** For many Christians, the salvation that God’s grace offers us produces times of awesome joy and peace. But human emotions are volatile and erratic. At times of pain or doubt, even the strongest, most confident Christ-follower may struggle to feel that “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts.” That’s why Paul based our ultimate security not in how we feel at any given moment, but in an event: Jesus valued and loved us so much that he died for us.

**Application:** The Christian faith affects our feelings, but it is not mainly about how we feel. Our faith is rooted in a specific history—the history of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. So Paul said the vital proof of God’s love for us is the fact that Jesus died for us. How solid is your grasp of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection? How might you deepen your knowledge and understanding of that central history?

**Prayer:** Lord God, thank you that you weren’t content to love our little planet from a distance. Thank you for coming in Jesus, and for putting your saving love into sacrificial action on our behalf. Amen.

**Saturday, December 10**

**Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-19**

This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God.

**Observation:** Paul's letters included prayers he prayed for the Christian converts in the little house churches he raised up in Asia and Europe. In this passage sent to Christians at Ephesus, he asked that the Holy Spirit, dwelling in their hearts, would give all believers "the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth." He used those geometric, almost architectural terms to express his belief that God's love is enormous, bigger ultimately than any love we can imagine. Yet he believed that it was spiritually vital that we do all we can to grasp and experience that awesome love.

**Application:** Paul's faith embraced the paradoxes of God's world. In Ephesians, he prayed that all believers would be able to "know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge." How have you been able to "know" God's love even though it reaches beyond the bounds of logic and intellectual expression? How can your heart know things that stretch your mind to its limits?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you love because you ARE love. I am loved, at all times and in all ways, because you ARE love. What a wonderful promise—what an awe-inspiring gift. Amen.