

## **Come Home For Christmas**

As we planned for Advent and began thinking about media, Phyllis Yandell suggested the theme of Come Home for Christmas. Rather than using that for Advent, we decided to make that the focus of tonight's service. We are glad you decided to come home for Christmas and join us. Some of you have come from some distance to be with your family and you've made one of the big decisions grownups have to make – whose house are we going to for Christmas.

As a boy growing up, we lived in Muskogee. My Mom's family for the most part lived in Indianapolis, my Dad's in Sapulpa. Each year we had to decide whose house we were going to for Christmas. I can remember the adventure of going to Indianapolis for Christmas, making the drive there. I remember one Christmas Dad couldn't go because of keeping the pottery open so my Mom, my brother and I made the trip on the bus. Mostly I remember being so sick I thought I would die, riding on that bus, smelling the diesel fumes at the bus station in St. Louis. But it was worth the suffering because we got to go to Indianapolis for Christmas.

Indianapolis was everything that Muskogee Oklahoma wasn't. My aunt Martha lived in this big old 2 story duplex house. It had a big wooden staircase that creaked when you walked on it. A big bathtub with legs on it where my cousins drowned a bunch of chicks. (Who knew chicks couldn't swim like ducks?) A basement with a coal shoot. There was often snow on the ground at Christmas. My aunt worked at L. S. Ayres, a department store with a huge window display of moving Christmas characters. It was all so big, so exotic to me. I loved going there. I loved my cousins and aunts and uncles. My grandma Cox was there. Sometimes my aunt Cledith was home from Africa and was there.

More often however, we went to Sapulpa to my Grandma and Grandpa Taylor's house. Most of my childhood they lived in a house by the turnpike gate. It seemed such a big place then. Grandpa had a big garden, a barn, a rent house behind his house where for a while my cousin lived, a big open field where we played football. They had a basement but instead of having coal, their basement had onions, potatoes and stuff grandma Taylor had canned (always wondered why they didn't call that jarred instead of canned since everything was in jars).

Grandma had a silver tree with a big revolving color wheel. Pretty high tech for my grandparents in the 1960's. Lots of good food. Chicken and noodles, turkey and dressing with the cousins eating on the back porch, gag gifts to my Grandpa from my uncles. It was fun, but it depended on the answer to the question, "Whose house are we going to for Christmas this year?"

We moved to Tulsa in 1967 and Christmas changed as the family grew. My brother married and moved to Kansas, then Illinois, then New York, then California. They would try to make it home to see everyone, but of course they had to go to Muskogee to see his wife's family as well as our family. You know how it works: Our house on Christmas eve, someone else's house for Christmas morning, back to the grandparents by afternoon or evening.

Paula and I married and we began that same, occasionally awkward journey every married couple takes: whose house are we going to for Christmas? Paula's folks were pastoring in Hominy. Tulsa? Sapulpa? Hominy? Mom's side, Dad's side, aunts, uncles, inlaws. It's not an easy decision. Some set up a rotating schedule, some just stay at home, some leave town. We are coming home for Christmas, but whose house will we go to?

Joseph and Mary had some decisions to make. They didn't know it yet, but it was their first Christmas together. They were married, although the Bible tells us they would not consummate their marriage until after the birth of this special child conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The decision about where to go had been determined by Caesar Augustus. Everyone was to go to their ancestral hometown to register for a census being taken and to pay their taxes to Rome. According to Luke 2 they went to Bethlehem of Judea, the town of David, because both Joseph and Mary were descendants of David.

They made the difficult journey from Nazareth in Galilee all the way to Bethlehem just south of Jerusalem. The little town of Bethlehem was no doubt crowded with people, some enjoying the reunion with extended family, others angry and cursing the Romans and the taxes they were having to pay. One would assume Mary and Joseph had cousins or family of some kind still living in Bethlehem and they had hoped to stay with them. Of course there was no way to call ahead to family – no way to make advanced reservations for lodging at the Bethlehem Inn, so they arrive, Mary “great with child” as King James puts it, and suddenly no one has a room for them. Maybe they arrived too late and their cousins had gotten all the rooms. Maybe everyone was just too busy, “what with the census and the taxes and all”. Maybe the fact that Mary was pregnant before she married Joseph made their family a little hesitant about inviting them into their home. Can you imagine Joseph's side of the family? “I can't believe they came here. How do we even know it's his baby? Let them stay with her side of the family.” And Mary's side is thinking, “Imagine, Mary making up some story to try to protect Joseph's reputation and him going along with it instead of just telling the truth. Letting her take the blame and shame. Let them stay with his side of the family.”

Whatever the reason, they found themselves alone with no place to go for Christmas. Ever been there? Alone on Christmas? Maybe even surrounded by others, by festive crowds, by family, but you felt alone? I've been there. So have Mary and Joseph. Think of this young couple, no family to help them, delivering a baby in a stable. Imagine how frightened and alone they must have felt.

Coming home for Christmas, but whose house will we go to? With no room to be found, they went to a stable and delivered their firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger. Mary and Joseph came home for Christmas, but ended up in a stable instead. But guess whose house Jesus came to for Christmas?

The bible says, **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” John 1:14** Jesus came to our house for Christmas! Jesus took on flesh and was born into our world, in order to become the atoning sacrifice for our sins by dying on the cross to save us. Jesus came to our world, to our house, for Christmas. He came to be with us. Immanuel, God with us!

Jesus said, **“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.” Revelation 3:20** Jesus came to my house for Christmas and he wants to come to yours as well. He knocked on the door. I opened the door of my heart, he came in and we celebrated together and ate together. And not only did he stay for Christmas... I asked and he agreed to stay forever. Jesus came to live in my house!

Guess what else? John 1:12 tells us **“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:12** He came to my house and now we are family. God is my Father and Jesus is my elder brother. Romans 8 tells us we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. We're not alone on Christmas anymore.

Whose house are we going to for Christmas? For some of us, circumstances have changed. There is no house to come home to for Christmas. Both parents are gone. The cousins have grown up and have families and grandchildren of their own. Everything has changed.

I can't go to grandma's house anymore. My mom said after she married Dad and moved to Oklahoma, her mom never had a home for my Mom to return to. My Grandma Cox always lived with one of her daughters and she died in 1963. My Mom's sisters are gone. My Grandma Taylor died in 1987 and my Grandpa in 1996. I don't know who lives in that house by the Turnpike gate but I doubt they would want me to join them for Christmas.

Where are we going for Christmas this year? Mom and Dad are gone. Grandparents are gone. But you know what? I'm still planning to go to Grandma's house for Christmas someday. You see when Jesus made us part of his family he said, **"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust God and trust me too! There is plenty of room to live in my Father's house. I'm going to get a place ready for you. And if I do go and get a place ready for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so you can be there, where I am."** John 14:1-3

My grandparents and mom and Dad and my aunts and uncles all knew Jesus. They knew about that big house with all the rooms in it that Jesus had prepared for them. They're already there, in a new house in that wonderful place and one of these days, I'm going to grandma's house for Christmas again. It won't be in that house by the turnpike in Sapulpa or in that big old house in Indianapolis. The next time I go to grandma's house for Christmas, I'll be looking at streets of gold and there'll be a river of life that flows through that city and there'll be no more death or sorrow or parting or pain and best of all, Jesus will be there.

Someday soon I'm going to grandma's house again for Christmas. I recalled today how my Mom looked when my brother and I and the grandkids all showed up, the smile on her face, her hands clapped together. She counted on us arriving safe and sound for Christmas. You know what? She is counting on me and my family having Christmas at her house again someday. All of us.

Whose house are you going to for Christmas? You may have promised your mom or your grandparents or someone you would meet them in heaven but you've been running from God ever since. You need to come home to Jesus tonight and turn your life over to Him. Right where you are sitting, in the quiet of this Christmas eve service, I invite you to ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins and to come into your heart and life and be your savior and Lord. He will do that. He will give life to you. He will come to your house for Christmas and he will stay if you will ask him. He is knocking at your heart. Make a decision to open your heart to Jesus tonight. He wants to come into your heart and life for Christmas and forever. There's a song that's been running through my mind as I worked on this message. Softly and Tenderly.

Let's settle the question tonight about whose house we are going to for Christmas. Let's invite him into our house and then we can go to Jesus' house. He has plenty of room and he's expecting us as are so many others. It's a question that's settled by faith and a prayer. I invite you to open your heart to him as we pray.

We gather at the Lord's table tonight. You that are going to help us, if you will begin serving. We come to his table the same way we come to his house as we've talked about, not by our merits, not by our goodness, but by his grace alone. We are, on our own, deserving only of his just judgment and wrath, but through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness and pardon for our sins. We gather humbly here then, by faith and at his invitation. You don't have to be a member of our church to receive communion, you only need to be one who is trusting in Jesus and his saving grace. If you will hold the cups until everyone is served and we will take communion together.

The shepherds bowed their hearts at the manger as they looked with wonder upon God's greatest gift of love and grace. We too, as we hold his body broken for us and his blood spilled for our salvation, bow our hearts as we look with wonder at such grace and mercy. What a sacrifice. What a Savior.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.'" Take and eat this bread in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.

"In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you; do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Let's drink from the cup with thanksgiving, remembering that Christ's blood was shed for us.

God promised forgiveness of our sins to all who come to Christ in true repentance and faith. I affirm to you today, that through your faith in Christ and by his steadfast mercy and

grace, you are forgiven and your sins have been pardoned through his blood. Hear the good news: by his grace you have been redeemed.

O come let us adore him

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord and may the blessing of God Almighty, Father Son and Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Go from this table in his peace. Merry Christmas to all.