

“Come Home For Christmas”
Christmas Eve Candlelight

Luke 2:1-20
Dec. 24, 2009

"But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ~ Luke 2:10-11

I'm no mind reader but my guess is probably two things are true about you. One, you're probably a little distracted. You may be thinking about 95 things other things: the gifts you opened tonight or the one's you're going to open tomorrow, the leftovers that will take up all the extra space in your refrigerator after it's all over, the huge mess you'll have to clean up, your travel plans, the relatives with whom you hope to have a conflict-free celebration.

The other thing about you is you're a little tired—maybe a lot. There's only one word that can describe what we try to accomplish as Christmas draws near. Madness! Parties, shopping, baking, eating three times the number of calories we should, sending letters and cards, and kids home from school. It's no wonder you're tired.

So, now that you're knee deep and possibly up to your neck in Christmas festivities, I suggest you all take a deep breath. And you might say, "God, slow me down for a few minutes." These moments spent in worship on Christmas Eve might be the only time in the entire season when you slow down long enough to think about the real meaning of the holy day that's speeding past you. So, seize the moment. Lay aside your distractions and focus for a few minutes. Because God wants your attention.

Christmas is about God making a connection with you. It's about God reaching out to have a close and personal relationship with you. There's a verse in the Bible, where God says, "**You belong to Me. So come home.**" That's what God is trying to get across to you. "**You belong to Me. So come home.**"

You weren't meant to belong to your job or your career. You weren't meant to belong to your past and things you regret. You weren't meant to be the possession of other people. You were

made to belong to God. God made you, God created you and God knows everything about you and God made you for His purposes.

A growing number of scientists at Harvard and other prestigious schools are investigating how human biology allows us to connect with God. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania says, 'The human brain is genetically wired to embrace religious beliefs.' A University of California professor confesses, 'I once thought spirituality was the opium of the masses but now I recognize we're not only physical beings. We have a spirit.'" A Yale professor says, 'I was not prepared for science to take me to God.'"

You, in every cell of your body are wired for God. That's why you can find religion in every single culture. Because every human being desires to know their creator, to know the one who made them.

"Come home to me," God says. You belong to me." This theme, "coming home at Christmas," is very well known. You find it in all kinds of songs like "I'll Be Home for Christmas". It's in movies, it's in books, it's in poetry.

It's true that there's no place like home. But, no home is perfect. Not every family get's along together, even at Christmas. Little Johnny doesn't like the socks his grandma got for him. Mom accidentally burned the food. Sister Sue arrived late. Dad had to work. Uncle Harry got drunk. It's not always the wonderful happy time that we imagine or expect it to be. People think, if I could just get home for Christmas then it will be perfect and my life will be perfect. It doesn't always work that way. I think you could summarize the reality of a lot of Christmases in one word - fruitcake.

It's also true that no home is permanent. Kids

grow up. People move away. A loved one dies. Some of you have lost a loved one this year and this Christmas is particularly poignant for you because you're missing somebody. It hurts inside. My heart goes out to you, and so does God's.

But, let me say this as gently as possible. If all you have in this life is family, one day you're going to be very lonely. It takes more than family to make it in life. Families can be wonderful but families aren't perfect and families don't always last. You need more than that. That's why on this holy night, I'd like you to consider a different kind of coming home at Christmas. A spiritual homecoming. A coming home to God.

It's human nature to forget God or to keep God at a distance. I do it all the time. You do too. You can go days, weeks, months, maybe even years without even thinking about God. You get distracted by your career your family, your dreams, your hopes, your finances, your desires. It's very easy to shove God out of your life even though He's the reason that you're here. So you need to come home to God. You need to come back to Him at Christmas time.

You may ask, "What can I expect if I come home to God this Christmas?" Fortunately the Bible is very clear. It tells you exactly what you can expect if you reconnect with God. Let me name three of them.

1. The first thing you can expect is you'll come home to God's love and forgiveness.

This is the very first reason for Christmas. Jesus left His home in heaven to come to your home on earth—God in human flesh, God with skin on—so that you can get to know God, and so that God can say to you, "I love you and I want to forgive you."

Years ago Ernest Hemingway wrote a short story (*The Capital of the World*) about a young man named Paco who ran away from home and went to Madrid, Spain. He was estranged from his father and his father was heartbroken and he did everything he could to find his son. Finally in desperation he went to the newspaper in Madrid, Spain and he took out an ad in the personal column that said this: "Paco, all is forgiven. I

want you to come home. Meet me tomorrow at twelve noon in front of the hotel Montana." The next day that man showed up and he was shocked to find eight hundred young men named Paco who had responded to that ad, young men estranged from their fathers.

Did you know that your heavenly Father wants you to come home? It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done or who you've done it with or how long you've done it. God says I want you to come home to My love and My forgiveness. That's what Christmas is all about.

God showed how much He loved us by sending His only Son into the world so that we can have eternal life through Him. And you know that Jesus didn't remain a little baby in a manger. Jesus grew up. Jesus went from the cradle to the cross, saying "I'd rather die than live without you." That's how much God loves you. That's real love. Love came down at Christmas time. That's the first thing you can expect if you come home to God at Christmas time.

2. You can also expect to receive God's peace and strength. Peace, when things get chaotic in your life. Peace when the country is at war. Peace is what you need when the stock market is going south and your retirement fund is shrinking by the day. Peace is what you need when terrorists roam free. Peace is what you need when you get laid off, or you're going through a divorce.

When you face an uncertain future, when you face tough times, where do you go for strength? Where do you get the reservoir of peace that gives you the ability to keep on going in the middle of chaos or crisis or tragedy? Where do you go for strength?

Jesus Christ has an incredible offer for you. He says this. "If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens come to Me and I will give you rest for your soul."

Have you ever felt like giving up? I have no doubt that there are a lot of people here who feel like giving up. You may feel like giving up on your marriage. Or you may feel like giving up hope on your career or on your health or on your

kids or on your dreams. Maybe you've experienced some kind of personal failure, and you feel like giving up.

God brought you here this Christmas Eve. It's not by accident that you're here in church. God brought you here tonight so He could say this to you, "Don't give up. Don't give up. Look up. Look up to Me." Look up to God. Get plugged into the source of all power.

It's amazing to me that we often look to everything else but God to help us. And we look to everything else but God to find peace of mind. One day I typed this phrase "peace of mind" into an Internet search engine just to see what the Internet had to offer. The first item that came up was the *Peace of Mind Funeral Services*. Number two was a store selling candles, crystals and body soaps. Great! My marriage is falling apart... I'll go take a bath. I'm going bankrupt... I'll light a smelly candle. I'm sorry but I need a little bit more than candles and crystals to give me peace of mind. That's just not enough. A third link was a company selling cancer insurance.

If only it were that easy. You need peace of mind, but it's not going to come through that kind of stuff. If you've been feeling a little down, a little anxious, a little fatigued, worried, let me suggest to you an outstanding antidepressant. Come home to God. The one who made you, who created you, who's watched every moment of your life, who saw you take your first breath, who saw you formed in your mother's womb, knows everything about you and still loves you, forgives you and says, Come home to My peace and strength.

3. When you come home to God you will come home to hope and joy: hope when situations seem hopeless in your life, joy when you feel grief or sadness or depression.

Think of it this way: past, present and future. God's forgiveness takes care of your past - all of the things you've ever done wrong are forgiven and washed away. God's peace and strength gives you help in the present. And then, through the promise of new life God gives you hope for the future. What a deal. Your past, present, and

future are in God's hands.

I don't know what you've gone through this past year. It may have been a very tough year for you personally. You may have had a "ground zero" in your life. And maybe you're still reeling from it - from the tension, from the pressure, from the stress or from the grief. I don't know what your situation might be, but I do know this. God is not finished with you. If your heart is still beating, if you're still taking a breath, it means God has a future filled with promise and purpose waiting for you.

God wants the rest of your life to be the best of your life. Then one day God wants to take you home to His home—a perfect home, a permanent home called heaven.

Why did Jesus Christ come at Christmas? Because God didn't want to love you from a distance. God wanted to love you up close so God came to earth. God came to earth and became one of us so we could know what God is like.

Let me be really clear about this. I'm not inviting you to come home to religion. I am not even inviting you to come home to a church. I'm inviting you to come home to the One who made you, who loves you, who sent His Son to die for you. I'm inviting you to come home to God.

What I've shared is nothing complex. It's not real hard to understand. Any five year old can understand that I've just talked about - come home to God. Come home to God's love and forgiveness, come home to God's peace and strength, come home to God's hope and love.

The real bottom line is this: are you going to take a that step of faith this Christmas and come home to God? Or are you going to let it bypass you another year and continue to celebrate the birth of somebody you have no connection to at all? Well, that doesn't make sense. God wants you to come home to Him.

What's even more amazing is this. God's waiting on you. When you throw open your doors to God you will discover at the same moment that God has already thrown open His door to you. Jesus Christ accepts you. Will you

receive Him and what he comes to give you? Can you think of one reasonable logical, sane reason to delay? Can you think of one logical reason to not accept God's love and forgiveness and all that Christ offers?

Right before Beatle guitarist George Harrison died he was interviewed by Rolling Stone magazine and he said something very profound. He said "The most important thing in life is to figure out why we're here and what we're here for. Everything else in life can wait, but the search for God cannot wait." I could not agree more. It cannot wait.

"Right now God is ready to welcome you. Tonight Jesus Christ is ready to save you." No matter who you are, no matter what you've done. I don't care if you're a religious person or a non-religious person. I don't care if you're on our membership rolls or not, whether you're Catholic or Lutheran, or Jewish or Buddhist or no religion at all. We're not talking about religion. We're talking about connecting to God. We're talking about a relationship not a religion. You can come home to God today, because God has come in Jesus Christ to make his home with you.

The Bible says that every time one person comes home to God - just one - they have a party in heaven. The angels rejoice and they throw a party. The angels are waiting to have your party.