

“I’LL BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS”

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel

Preached on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2014

They Go Together, Don’t They?

Home and Christmas. Certainly they’re in the movies, on TV, in songs like “Please Be Home for Christmas,” “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” and “White Christmas,” although the last of these has a sense of not being at home, of getting used to a snowy Christmas and not having snow. And there’s a sad, evocative song about wanting to run away from home, “I Wish I Had a River that I Could Skate Away on.” Have you ever heard that one? And scads of movies are about Christmas and home.

“It’s a Wonderful Life” had its annual showing last week. That’s an interesting movie because it’s set in a small town about a man named George Bailey, who really would give anything to leave home. Throughout the movie he’s a young man who dreams of faraway adventures. He probably reads “National Geographic” and daydreams about Bali and Africa and India, and is entranced by the desire to visit such places. Moreover, he’d like to build whole communities. He fervently wants to leave home.

But what happens to George Bailey? He tries and tries, but life intervenes. It has another plan for him. He’s about to go to college, but his dad has a stroke. He stays home and takes over the Bailey Savings-and-Loan, ending up building homes for many of his neighbors and turning Bedford Falls into a wonderful community – unlike the drab vision of Potterville that the angel Clarence shows George as an illustration of what things would be like if he had not been born to build. So the movie is all about home, wanting to leave it, and yet realizing that it’s the place where he needs to be.

Are You at Home in Your Home, Easy in Your Easy Chair?

There’s a quote I read at Christmastime: “All roads lead to home.” But I have a question for you: What exactly *is* home? Is it a place? We all live someplace currently, I would imagine. Some of us live in houses or apartments, and do we feel at home where we’re currently living? Just think about it. It’s more than a place, isn’t it? Do we feel at home in our homes? And what does that depend on? That feeling of being at home? Are we at home in our homes? Or “easy in our easy chairs,” as the song goes? As we think about it, what else does that sense of being at home, that welcome, that peace, that contentment depend on?

I remember when I was a brand-new banker for Marine National Bank in Wildwood, New Jersey. That’s where I started out. I ended up in Manhattan, but at first I was still living at

home. After I graduated from college, my mother was very ill with lung disease, so I made a decision to stay home and help out. Then at Christmastime I had a job interview on the day of the office Christmas party. I was sitting in the hallway waiting to be called in to the personnel director to undergo the interview. That's a strange day to have an interview. Everyone's walking around in their Christmas outfits, and I'm nervous with my resumé on my lap. I'll never forget it, of course, sitting there and waiting because I had decided to stay home.

Live an Exciting Life; Study Economics, Be a Credit Analyst

I didn't want to, actually, I wanted to go to New York city like my friends, like George Bailey, and live an exciting life. But my mom was sick; I was needed at home. I worked at the bank, and it was my first real job at twenty-one. I had baby-sat and had done other things, but this was my real job. I was an economics major and so became a credit analyst.

The following Christmas was also clear in my mind. We had a Christmas potluck luncheon in our break room, and I remember everyone bringing in their food. I could tell as we sat down and talked that a lot of us were rushing through lunch in order to get home and get on with the real Christmas. Get to our real homes to celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Some people were lingering, however – one man in particular. He was an older guy, in charge of accounting, and he told me, "I'm not going to rush. I'm going to stay here and finish up because, well, this is my home. There are people here, and there's nothing to rush home to. My home is just a house. I got divorced, and my wife left me. We had no kids. My house just doesn't feel like home, so I'll lock up here. I'll clean up the dishes. You go on. You go home."

Learning What Home Is, What It Depends upon

I was young, but I was getting a lesson in what home really is, and I started to get a sense of gratitude for the home that I didn't know I had before, although I was a little resentful of having to stay in Cape May of all places. I wanted to move on, but I realized I did have a home. Then I started to think about what made it a home as I thought about those people at the bank.

A couple at the same bank told me they were going to a casino for Christmas. This was in the early days of Atlantic City in that the first casinos were open at night. I was a bit of a prig at twenty-one, so I thought, "You're going gambling at Christmas? Yuck!" I didn't actually say that, but I was thinking it. The man of the pair was standing there, and he said, "Well, you know, we go to casinos because there are people there."

It was a lesson in what home depends on and what some people need to depend on at Christmas – a sense of belonging. People around you at least, if not your relatives. Home is a place, of course, but without people it would be little more than an empty shell. What happens when

things change, as they always do? Lots of people tell me that their kids may or may not make it home for Christmas, and my question is, “Does Christmas depend on that?” What if they can’t make it? What if there is a storm? People move. People change. They leave. They die. What happens to home then? It does change, doesn’t it?

Resiliency Is Leaving Home for Another Home

As you know, Monday through Friday and Sunday afternoons I go to Elizabeth Church Manor and Saint Louise Manor and work with the residents as their chaplain. They’ve all left home, whether it was a house or an apartment. Many of them downsized to smaller quarters, but either they made the decision or their families made it for them. Or their physical dependencies or mental problems made it necessary to move into a place that has health-care facilities. Some areas of the home have more care than do others. We have assisted living, where people get a little help, all the way to the nursing home, where people get a lot of help.

Are they at home or not? As you can imagine, some of them feel at home. But some of them tell me, “This isn’t my house. It will never be my home.” “My home is in Johnson City. I wish I could go there.” “I can’t. My daughter says I can’t. I resent that.” And so on. I get all kinds, and I thought about it because I saw myself in their position to gain understanding.

Who are the people who feel at home at the homes? They are those, by and large, who I would say are the most resilient. The ones who can deal with change are the most flexible, if you know what I mean. The ones who can transfer that sense of home from where they once were to where they are now. For them, home doesn’t depend on a particular house that they lived in for thirty years or a particular apartment or on the husband or the wife or the kids, as important as all that is. Home is the people and the place where they live.

Bring Your Sense of Home with You

The residents brought their sense of home with them. They planted themselves in a new place. They’ve made friends. They know the schedule. They join in. And they almost always have a sense of faith as well. Not necessarily a classic faith, but if they have a faith, that divinity, God, is always with them.

Our scriptural passage for today has always struck me, I must tell you, because the very first time I preached a real sermon in a real pulpit, I was a recent graduate of the preaching course at Princeton Seminary. Usually in your second year, you had to take preaching class. We preached three mini sermons, a three-minute, a five-minute, and then a full-blown sermon to our class. That’s how it was handled. We were nervous, but you started out with a couple people and then the group grew larger and larger.

Sweating Bullets in the Big League

After taking that class, I got a call from my home church, First Presbyterian of Cape May. The caller asked, “Well guess what, Janet, we’re in between pastors, and we have no one to preach Christmas Eve. Would you do it?” This was a tall order, for I wasn’t yet a graduate. I was just taking the preaching course, when I was asked to preach in my home pulpit on Christmas Eve. I thought, “Oh boy, this is the big leagues, and here I am, only in my first year of seminary.”

By this time my mom had passed away, but my dad was still there, and I visited him on the holidays. So I said, “Yes.” I worked on that sermon. Oh, how I worked on that sermon! I thought it was You know. I mean, I did research! I translated from the Greek! I was sweating bullets! You name it! Nevertheless, it seemed . . . mediocre, but anyway Well, it was dull. People were yawning, wanting to get home to celebrate their family Christmases.

Driving down from Princeton, I remember that Christmas music was on the radio, and “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” came on. I was thinking about it while driving to my home, where my dad was – a home that no longer felt like home to me. My mom was gone, the house was starting to turn, honestly, into a bachelor pad. You know what I mean. It had that look and feel – somewhat messed up without my mom’s careful housekeeping. Magazines were piled up, you know, along with all kinds of other stuff. The kitchen wasn’t as pristine as it used to be, and when we had Christmas dinner, the china did not come out. We didn’t have paper plates, but we had something fried as usual because that’s all my dad could do.

Home Is Where You Make It

Home had changed, and I realized it used to be my home because I no longer feel at home there. I’m thinking about that this year because my current home in Johnson City now feels like my home as a result of my making it so. I want us to notice this story in our scripture passage for this morning as well as the whole Christmas story. Hearth and home are so connected, aren’t they?

Mary gets the word from the angel Gabriel that she’s amazingly pregnant, and what is it that she does? She leaves home. She gets on the road. She’s up in northern Israel. She goes all the way to Judea, which is in southern Israel, right around Jerusalem, where her cousin, Elizabeth, lives with Zechariah the priest. It’s a wonderful gift from God that they’re both pregnant at the same time.

Elizabeth is further along, but here these two women are united in this amazing faith story of being pregnant by miraculous means. Even so, it means that Mary has to leave her home. She’s young. She needs her parents, but we don’t know what they think. So off Mary goes to spend three months with Elizabeth until she [Elizabeth] is ready to deliver. Then it’s time for Mary. After this amazing meeting, baby John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb and somehow the baby and Elizabeth recognize who Mary is, and Mary sings her magnificent song. (Luke 1, 46-55.)

Mary goes back, and I wonder. I don’t think she could really go back home three months along with a baby – kind of not married but engaged. I’m sure she went right to Joseph, and they

started their lives together. They were changed completely. Obviously Mary couldn't go home. And when you think about the Christmas Eve story, the kernel of it is that everybody is on the road. Not just Mary and Joseph but *everybody* because a census was called for taxation purposes. Everyone must go to their ancestral homes.

Where would that be for me and maybe for you too? Who knows? Somewhere in Ireland? Somewhere in Germany? I have no idea where I would go. Maybe Africa, if we all went to our basic ancestral homes. Or to Babylon or North Africa. It would be pretty crowded. Try to find a room. Everybody was on the road; nobody was home at Christmas.

A cozy hearth and the Christmas story got put together later. So it is for Mary and Joseph and the residents who live at Saint Louise Manor and Elizabeth Church and all the patients in the hospital and all those soldiers on active duty and our shut-ins in nursing homes and maybe under hospice care in their own homes.

You and I, Where Is Our Home? Right Here!

This is where we need to feel at home. This is where God is born. And we remember that every Christmas, so I really hope and pray that we all feel it, no matter where we are, whether we have to move, whether we're going to stay put, whether we're going to go on a trip, whether our kids can come or not, whether our table is full or more empty than it's ever been.

Then we'll be at home this Christmas. And always.

Amen.