

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

A Sermon by The Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, December 25, 2016

There's Poignancy in Christmas Songs

Good morning and a merry Christmas to all of you and to your families. There are not many of us here this morning, but I'm glad you are with me on this beautiful, balmy Christmas morning.

A long time ago, I was driving my car, listening to Christmas songs on the radio right before that holiday. But in today's world, the Christmas songs don't start just before December 25. Instead, you start to hear them right after Halloween. Thankfully, I love Christmas music, but I'm almost ready to change the dial after three full months of Christmas songs.

Years ago, the carols were on the radio only a couple days before Christmas Eve. Of course, a great many of them were about home for the holidays. Home and Christmas kind of go together, don't they? And the carols reflect that in songs like *Home for the Holidays* and *Please Come Home for Christmas*.

A particular favorite was and still is *I'll be Home for Christmas*. Some of the lyrics of this pop classic are about everything you can think of regarding Christmas: *You can count on me*; *Please have snow and mistletoe*; and *Presents 'round the tree*. Some of these are very poignant, depending on what's going on in our lives.

I really started to think about home on that drive. What makes a house, an apartment,

or a room a home? Do we all have a home? Do we feel at home in our homes?

Where Do You Go? Whom Do You See?

Of course, I hope you have a warm feeling about your home, especially at Christmas. Families are continually staying and going. What to do? So many people tell me of their struggles, especially at holiday time, Thanksgiving and Christmas in particular. Easter, Arbor Day, July Fourth, not so much. Well, what am I going to do this Arbor Day? I really don't know yet.

We usually make plans when thinking about Thanksgiving. This is a time that families can get stretched out, unfortunately, if they are newly married and even if they're not newly married. If you have in-laws, where do you go? You sometimes have to divide your time, don't you? "We'll be at your place at Thanksgiving and at their place at Christmas." And you know, parents can get upset. "You weren't here last Christmas." And so it starts, right? Where are the grandchildren going to be, the great-grandchildren?

I have a good friend named Amy, and her eldest son has a girlfriend, so now there's another family involved. He tries to split his time every holiday because everybody is local, and the new generation has to check in with the older generations. So he comes to Thanksgiving dinner and has the first course, and then he beats it to finish the meal at the next home. At Christmas, the

same thing happens. Amy said that next year they're going to have to pick. "I want my eldest son to be here throughout the meal and then you go to the other house for Christmas, and so forth."

We can get stretched, and then suddenly we're in the generation in which we're experiencing our kids getting stretched. There are those, of course, who don't have a lot of family or there are those who have to jump in their car to travel.

When Change Comes, Tradition Changes

For many years, Christmas for me was doing my service and then jumping in the car and driving to Cape May, but I don't have to do that anymore. Things do change. Distance can become a factor because so many families are scattered. This is not the old days, when everybody grew up and lived in the same town.

In the present day, you might have relatives all around the world, for all I know. You probably do; so do I. And we don't see each other at the holidays. We get cards. Now we can skype, which is wonderful, and we can email each other. You can get your messages right away.

I heard from a dear friend, whom I'm going to see next September. Her name is Marcia, and she lives on the Gold Coast of Australia, so I got a nice note from her on Christmas morning. We can do that instantaneously. But it's not like being there, is it?

When there's change, our traditions have to change. Tradition is good, and I'm a very traditional person. I love traditions and Christmas because they always go together.

My masseuse, when she gives me a massage, tells me all about her Christmas. And

she tends to give me a deeper massage as she goes on because she gets a little stressed, and I have to ask her, "Could you ease up a little?" She's telling me first about the Beef Wellington that she has to make and that nobody eats. Everyone in her family is a vegetarian, but her grandmother made Beef Wellington. They're British, and darn it she's going to make Beef Wellington. You know, she's digging in and it's just like, "I have to make the Beef Wellington. I have to find some, and I have to bake."

And you know, her daughter and her son-in-law and her two beloved grandchildren have moved to Florida. Huge change. Everything is different. But they are coming, and she was telling me about the tradition. They are going to stay because she loves them, and they are the ones who have to change.

New traditions happen, don't they. We all know this. Everyone in the sanctuary this morning has seen traditions change because that's life, isn't it? Some traditions are important. Some are less important, but you carry them on anyway.

I've Let the Butter Cookies Go

I might have told this story to you before. My residents have heard it; it was passed on to me. One of the gems from my family was the butter-cookie gun that never worked in the first place. You put the Christmas tree, the little dial, the little doohickey on the bottom, and you try to get the dough down, and then it would come out as Christmas glop. I mean those cookies were good, very buttery. It was one of those B's that I love — butter, bread, and bacon — the three basics (but that sounds a B too). Yes, butter cookies. I love them, but they didn't look like Christmas trees. It took a while, and the dough always got stuck.

My mother and I did this every year, and after she died, I was still doing it. You know, listening to the radio and trying to get the Christmas trees to look like Christmas trees. I thought one year, I don't have to do this anymore. I mean I loved my mother. I will always love her. She lives in my heart, but I do not have to make butter cookies anymore. It was a glorious thing to relieve myself of this annual chore. Christmas came early, I guess. I'm generally up to date, but not with butter cookies.

So, there are those things we have to change as the years go by and as things change.

Homes and People Change with the Years

A long time ago now, I was a young woman working for a bank, and I started to learn about Christmas and home. I was about 23, and I was experiencing my first very glitzy Christmas party. That's something companies don't do much anymore, with an open bar and shenanigans and all kinds of stuff. It was quite wild, and I was 23. But we also had our in-office Christmas party. We had a covered-dish event. A lot of people brought their Crock-Pots, and we all provided a dish, and it was Christmas Eve morning, but of course most years, banks are open and we had to work.

A lot of us were rushing through that meal to get home and start our real Christmas. But I realized that there were a couple of people for whom the office party was their Christmas. I could tell they had really gone all-out with their meals, and they were lingering at the office because there was nobody at home, and this was their Christmas celebration. I was 23 and I was young, but it started to sink in. Different people have different circumstances.

Home does change. The location is very much so. I knew that early. My first big move in life was when I was 16 years old, and I moved from north Jersey down to Cape May, which of course is nice, but it was a huge change, and Christmas changed along with it.

Places change. Houses become apartments, condos perhaps. Condos can become a single room. And of course, the people change, not always intending to, but they move away. The job calls them away. They get married. They get divorced. They get sick. They die. We know this, and our traditions and our homes change, over and over again.

For a great many of us, when we think of the classic Christmas memory, we may very well think of that childhood home. Our families, our aunts and uncles and cousins, our brothers and sisters, and it's changed, hasn't it? So many people tell me, "I just don't feel like I'm in the Christmas spirit this year. It just doesn't feel like it's Christmas." And I often think that's what they mean. Christmas has changed, though, because of their circumstances. The place, the people have changed.

Trying to Recover Christmases Past

We can try to recover what we felt those first couple of Christmases. It's the home we were in and the people we were with, but we really can't reconstruct them.

The residents at the homes where I work are all elderly. They've moved many times, perhaps, and now they're in single rooms and apartments, and for so many of them, their families are scattered. Many of them know their families can't get to see them. They probably have received a card and a poinsettia, but they're in a very new place

which is not what their home was. Christmas is dawning for them too, this morning.

I was listening to *I'll Be Home for Christmas* in the car that day so long ago now. I was a first-year seminarian at Princeton, but I had been handed a rather large project. My home church was First Presbyterian at Cape May and that church was between pastors. They didn't have anybody to preach for Christmas Eve. I was a first-year seminarian, and I was asked to preach the Christmas Eve sermon, and was I ever nervous. While driving my car, I was prewriting my sermon in my head, and *I'll Be Home for Christmas* came on the radio.

Something hit me then that I've never forgotten as I listened to that beautiful song. There is something fundamental about Christmas. We hear the Christmas story. We heard it twice in a weekend. That first Christmas away from home is like the very first Christmas because Joseph and Mary were not at their home.

On the first Christmas in Bethlehem, Rome, the master of the world, had declared a tax census. Imagine the chaos if everybody had to pick up and go to their ancestral homes, wherever that might have been, and for you and me, that would have been hard to manage, wouldn't it? What would such a mix of ancestry have been like? Where would we have gone if we had been told to go to our ancestral homes? I honestly wouldn't know where to go.

Joseph did. It was Bethlehem, that little village that was the birthplace of David, and Joseph was of the House of David. Mary was heavily pregnant. They traveled three days and got there of course, and you know the story so well. Bethlehem was so packed, so chaotic that there was no room anywhere.

Mary had to give birth in a stable. She placed the son of God in a feeding trough, wrapped him in swaddling clothes. Nobody's home.

Christmas Realized Is Jesus in Us

That Christmas, I realized then, was far more about Jesus being born in our hearts and in our lives, no matter where we are, no matter who we're with, no matter what's surrounding us, no matter what's happened to our home, whether our kids are near or far, whether we have children, whether we're alone or with a huge group of people, whether we're in Binghamton or New York City or around the world, Jesus is born always on Christmas in our hearts, and we celebrate that love within. It really doesn't depend on where we are or who we're with. Not really.

My prayer this Christmas morning for everyone is that, no matter what, we all feel the birth of Christ within each of us. That peace and that love that Jesus gives us, that Jesus represents.

My Prayers for Those Not at Home

That's my prayer for every single person here in this sanctuary this morning. But it's really my prayer especially for those who aren't at home. And there are so many of them. I'm just going to list a few:

For all those residents who had to leave their homes. In some cases, they built that home with their spouses and their families, and now they live in a room or in an apartment.

For those people living in tents, all the refugees, all the people of Syria, especially those of Aleppo, but all of them who aren't at home.

For people in Germany, those Berliners who were perhaps sitting in hospital waiting rooms for their loved ones who were hurt in that terrible Christmas market crash.

For all those people who are in hospitals, in the wards. They are full. Saint Jude's with all the children. Their families at Ronald McDonald home. Wilson General Hospital, all of them.

All the residents, all the nursing homes, all the assisted-living staffs, all the police, all

the firefighters, all the first responders, all the doctors and nurses, all the aides and techs.

All the soldiers and sailors and marines and coast guardsmen and women on active duty.

So many who aren't at home.

Jesus is born, and may those who are away from home feel that in their hearts. May we all feel that, now and always.

Amen.