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Title: The Inn: Housing the Holy – Invited Home

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Text: [Luke 2:1-20](#)

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In this season, we've been in a series of sermons called: "The Inn: Housing the Holy." We hope that this time would prepare us to be a home for Emanuel which means "God with us." When Christ comes to live in our hearts, it is then that we are his. When we belong to Christ, we can truly say – "we are home."

If you are like me, the definition of HOME has changed over the years. As a youngster, we would go to my grandparent's homes on Christmas. In my case, both sets of grandparents were in the same small town, so we could be at one side of the family in the morning to open presents and eat a Christmas meal and the other side of the family for an evening Christmas meal and more presents. My mother had five siblings and my dad had seven siblings so the gatherings were always large. Being home at Christmas for me then meant being at a grandparent's home with lots of people around.

A funny thing happened when I went to college to reshape my definition of home. The very month that I left for college, my parents sold their home – the house and farm that I had grown up on - and moved into town. They said that they could no longer care for the large yard on the farm. It was somewhat understandable because the person that took care of the yard had moved to college. Coming home from college that first Christmas was odd because the house I came back to had never been my home. I had to test the old, old saying, "Home is where the heart is" and I discovered it was mostly true.

Christmas is a time that we want to be home. Some of the most moving Christmas songs are about longing to be home. "I'll Be Home for Christmas" was recorded in 1943 by Bing Crosby.¹ It was originally written to honor soldiers overseas during World War II who longed to be home at Christmas time. Perry Como made the song – "Home for the Holidays" – a Christmas standard. It was released in 1954. "Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays, 'cause no matter how far away you roam, when you pine for the

sunshine of a friendly gaze, for the holidays, you can't beat home sweet home."²

Christmas calls us home. Traditions call us home. It may be why you are here on this special night – to raise candles and sing Silent Night. This place may give a sense of being home. I hope it does. Whether you are home this Christmas - with family or not - God is ready to make a home in you. Today, if you hear nothing else, if you remember nothing else, remember that you are always invited to be at home with Christ.

We've come tonight to hear these words - "They found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." We know Christmas as a birth story. But we're so focused on that manger, we can miss that it's an adoption story, too. Our traditional Christmas reading from the gospel of Luke gives us all the drama and detail of the birth scene, with its laboring mother, nervous father, and family out behind the inn that held no room. But the earliest words written about the birth of Jesus are less about birth and more about adoption – not Jesus adoption but our adoption. Even though we read the Christmas story from Luke or Matthew, the earliest mention of the birth comes from Galatians. According to Bible scholar, Marcus Borg, Galatians was written at least 40 years before Luke penned his gospel.³ The words come from Paul, in the fourth chapter of Galatians.

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children." (Galatians 4:4-5)

For some of you, this is much more than a metaphor. You know the power of Paul's image in personal ways because adoption is part of your family story. In this season when so much centers on pregnancy, birth, labor, and delivery — when so much centers on the manger — we remember that there are so many who live without the safety of family and the assurance of home. It is good to be reminded that there are so many ways that God and God's people can form a family and redefine our definition of home.

I read this week about 9-year-old Loralie, who was adopted last month in Los Angeles on National Adoption Day. She was one of 165 Los Angeles County children in foster care who were officially adopted by their forever families on that day. Loralie, had spent 1,445 days in the foster care system starting at the age of 4. But this Christmas, she is officially a member of the Henry family in La Verne, California. Her new mom, Zoe Henry, was her second-grade teacher. Henry says she knew Loralie was her daughter the moment the little girl walked into her classroom. "She completes our family, she completes our life. She brings such adventure and joy and fun and

spunkiness to everything that we do, so it's perfect. It's perfect." Henry said as she held back tears.⁴

Sometimes we see it. Now and then, at certain extraordinary moments in our lives, we catch sight of the unrestrained joy in a setting where there has so often been grave disappointment. Hope that had been pent-up finally released in a place where we were starting to wonder if it would visit again. In the words of Isaiah, it's like "a great light" seen among those who have "dwelled in darkness." Christmas is that glimpse. And Paul has a word for it – he calls it "adoption."

Paul knows that the coming of Jesus into the world – Christmas - is for people who have known the deepest darkness. Those who have known isolation, trauma. Those who have known so much of the old world, with its old stories. The world where things beyond your control are running things and setting the pace for your life; where unjust systems render many vulnerable or on the run; where life is often spent in fragile and difficult places. Christmas is for unwed teenage mothers, nervous and stupefied fathers-to-be, shepherders and low-wage workers, and every other person who has ever felt far from home or wondered if anyone is coming for them at all. And we've all been there whether we're there now or not. Paul says to them and you that, in Christ, you are adopted. You are invited home.

Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner's memoir is about home — it is entitled *The Longing for Home*. He tells about when he was a young writer in New York, trying to make it in the world of publishing and not doing so well, and he started going to church at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. He recalls the minister by the name of George Buttrick, telling a story on a Sunday near Christmas. As he had been leaving church, Buttrick had overheard someone on the steps asking someone else, "Are you going home for Christmas?" Buechner remembers Buttrick from the pulpit, peering out over the top of his glasses at all those people, asking, "Are you going home for Christmas?"⁵

He said it in such a way that brought tears to his eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is found this night Bethlehem but it's not the "where" that makes it home, it's the "who." Home is where Christ is, and where we know once again the strong, saving news that there is One who loves the world so much as to never give up on it, to always come for us, claim us, and remind us who we are as beloved children of God. That's why Christmas is not only a birth story. It's an adoption story.

A third-grade teacher was having a hard time settling on a suitable role for one of her students in the school's Christmas pageant. Finally, she decided he should be the innkeeper, a role she felt he could handle. All he had to do was tell Joseph, "There is no room at the inn." Everything went fine at rehearsals, but when Joseph begged for a room for his pregnant wife during the first performance, the young man didn't have the heart to turn him down. To everyone's surprise, he said, "If it's so urgent, please come in."⁶

Christmas is God saying the same to us. His heart is opened to all of us, He will NOT turn us down, or turn us away. There is room! And in our hour of need, when the need is urgent, Christmas tells us "please come in!" God surprises us when we come to Him with our need to be forgiven of our sins, with the need to have our record of sins cleared forever, to have a home where we can be secure, safe, and loved forever. We can hear the clear voice of God saying, "God is with us".

Tonight, Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined." Tonight, Gabriel's words to Mary come alive. Tonight "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" is our sign that "nothing will be impossible with God."

What does it mean for you to come home? Would it mean finding answers to questions that have no answers, no real answers? Why couldn't mom get well? Why must this virus keep us apart? There may be no answers to these questions and others, but the faith to which we cling ever so tightly, a faith that we celebrate this night, is one that would take Jesus from the cradle to the cross. We have no answers to the questions about suffering — only the promise that Christ meets us in it.

This brings us more than anything else to why we are here. The shepherds were working the graveyard shift when they were surprised by angels. Sleepy shepherds and sleepy sheep are suddenly awakened to a show that rivaled anything they had ever seen before. After the angels make their announcement there comes a crescendo of hope that continues to build until the angels themselves erupt with words of praise. The birth of Christ announces Good News. He is the good news, for it is in Him that we have hope.

It was the announcement of His birth that re-awakened hope in the lives of shepherds. And hope, in turn, awakened a curiosity to the extent that they were willing to risk even their livelihood to "go over to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, that the Lord had made known to them." Being invited home means that we are willing to risk again, to re-experience the

awakening of hope and that we are willing — if we are curious enough — to latch on to His star and hang all of our hope on Him. Being invited home means that before we can feel at home, anywhere, we must first be at home with God. Being invited home means that “home” is a relationship with Christ more than it is a place. Home is not my grandparents' home or my parents' farm or even the home I will go home to tonight – it is the state of my heart. It is not a goal to achieve, but a child to receive.

And so, in some way, this story is home, a place where we belong. In Jesus Christ, God's own Son, we are safe, secure. In this story, there is light shining in whatever darkness surrounds us this evening. In this story about a humble birth, we know we are loved by God, and so we are safe, secure, alive, challenged to live as fully as we can. Walking with Christ, we know that we are home, home at last.

Wherever you find yourself this night, miles from a geographic home perhaps, know that you are loved. Know that you are adopted into the family of Christ. Know that you are home.

¹ Information on “I'll Be Home for Christmas” found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27ll_Be_Home_for_Christmas

² Information and lyrics for “Home for the Holidays” found at <https://genius.com/Perry-como-home-for-the-holidays-lyrics>

³ Borg, Marcus J., *Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*. Harper Collins Publishers, copyright 2012, pages 45 (Galatians) and 423 (Luke).

⁴ Adoption story with video found at ABC Los Angeles affiliate. <https://abc7.com/national-adoption-day-la-verne-foster-care-system-children/11262546/>

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. *The Longing for Home*. Harper San Francisco, copyright 1996.

⁶ Original source attributed to Alex Domokos of Winnipeg told in *Readers Digest*, Dec. 2004. Story found titled as “Please Come In” at <http://www.creativeyouthideas.com/resources/category/teaching-illustrations/page/4/>