

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Christmas Eve, 7:00pm, Dec 24, 2015
Luke 2:1-7; Isaiah 62:6-12**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

[SING!] "I'll be home for Christmas; You can plan on me; Please have snow and mistletoe... and presents by the tree; Christmas Eve will find me; where the love light beams; I'll be home for Christmas; if only in my dreams... .."

Are you home for Christmas? Perhaps you have come home for Christmas or maybe you just *are* home. Over the years, it seems like I've often been asked if I'd be going home for Christmas. It happened especially when I was in school out in Vancouver and I always found it an awkward question. Calgary is home to me but my immediate family haven't lived here for many years... so sometimes I would answer: "Well, I'm going to my parents' place..." Being together with my family on Vancouver Island was certainly home in some ways but it isn't the home where I grew up or where I've lived my day-to-day life. I suspect that I'm not alone in finding "home" to be a multi-faceted experience. Home, they say, is where the heart is. Home is whenever we gather with those we love. Home is a sense of rootedness and history. Home is family. Home is comfort and security. Home can be many things. And so... what does it mean for you to "go home" for Christmas?

In our first reading tonight, the prophet Isaiah offers hope to the people of Israel who had been far from home for far too long. Babylon had swept over Judah some 50-odd years earlier, destroying the city and the temple of Jerusalem and sending the survivors away into exile. But when Babylon fell to the rising Persian Empire, the people of Israel knew that the time of their exile was nearing its end. The people had wept with grief over their lost home and had been dreaming of a coming time when the Lord would lead them home once more. Tonight we hear something of the end of their hopelessness and their homelessness and the beginning of their new life in their renewed home.

Jerusalem is being re-established, the prophet says, and the Lord will make it renowned throughout the earth once more. Isaiah encourages the people to go... "go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones..." Go home and clear the way so that others may join you and the people of God may be a family together once more. "See, your salvation comes..." Isaiah calls, and re-names the renewing community: "The Holy People"; "The Redeemed of the Lord"; "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken." The time of exile is ended and the forsaken Jerusalem is no more, for the Lord has sought out the people and redeemed them and it's time to go home... home with God; home in God.

On the news this week it was reported that the number of migrants and refugees entering Europe this year has passed the one million mark. Over a million people displaced from their homes have found their way, by irregular means, to Europe, in what the International Organization for Migration has called "the continent's biggest wave of mass migration since the aftermath of the second world war." If the one million and counting refugees landing in Europe wasn't enough, it pales in comparison to the 2.2 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1.1 million in

Lebanon and 633,000 in Jordan. That's a lot of people, roughly 5 million, who are far from home... who are grieving the loss of their homes. I can hardly imagine what it would be like to be so fundamentally homeless... with family, perhaps but without the familiarity, the security, the rootedness and history that home represents. Many of us like to travel or have lived in different places that felt foreign, at least at first, but it usually happens by choice and we are able to return home either by voluntarily re-establishing our lives in a new place or by simply finishing our travel adventure and returning to that which we know... by coming home.

All the news we've heard this year about the plight of Syrian refugees makes our Gospel story, the Christmas story, all the more poignant. By decree of the Roman Emperor, all the world needed to be registered. This first registration occurred while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And there it is. This past year isn't the first year that mass displacement has occurred in and around Syria, albeit for different reasons. But then again, perhaps not as different as we might like to imagine. The demand by the Roman Emperor to return to "your own town" - the town of your ancestry - to be counted, is the demand of a tyrannical Empire that clearly caused great upheaval for many. Among those displaced was Joseph, a descendent of David, who had to travel with his pregnant fiancé, Mary. If one considers "home" to be the place of one's ancestry, the place of one's roots and history, then the city of David called Bethlehem was Joseph's home. And yet, it was not his home in the sense of what he knew - where he lived his day-to-day life. It was a foreign town that was busy, probably because of the chaos caused by the registration, and it was hard to find lodging.

It was there, in a small town bursting with travellers, away from home, that God chose to be born into the world: "While they were there, the time came for [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Thank goodness for the kind soul who found Mary and Joseph a safe place for their son Jesus to be born! To be away from home, alone in a foreign town at such a life-changing moment would be unsettling at best. The nameless innkeeper gets a bad rap in popular tellings of the nativity story and yet it was the innkeeper who offered the necessary hospitality at a critical time. I imagine that both Joseph and Mary dreamed of being home, of going home, on that first Christmas. How were they to know that their personal family drama, their momentary homelessness, would be remembered through the centuries and celebrated as a changing moment in all of humanity's relationship with God.

If Mary and Joseph were away from home for Jesus' birth, so too was God. We celebrate this night as miraculous, as world- and life-changing, because not only in history, but when we embrace this powerful story then for us too, on this very night, God leans toward the earth, leaving a heavenly home to make a home here, with us, instead. Tonight, God is with each of us, in a new way. The miracle of Jesus' birth is that God is no longer far away, exiled to the heavenly realms... God is no longer merely remote and transcendent and all-powerful. Rather, in Jesus, born into the world like all of us, a baby, tonight God enters human life, our lives, in all their frailty and frustration, in all their trouble and triumph. And through our acts of remembrance - in story, in bread and in wine - we bring all of it into this moment, that in Christ, we may find the comfort, security and love that is the fullness of coming home.

For some of us tonight, this place - St. Andrew's - is home. Some of us, though, find ourselves in a foreign land tonight, wishing perhaps that we were home instead. Some find a

sense of home in the familiarity of prayer or singing carols or in coming to the altar to receive communion. Some of us are grieving the loss of something about our home and some of us are celebrating a new sense of home that brings us much joy and new possibility. The good news tonight is that whatever our personal experiences - whatever our ups and downs, our struggles and our accomplishments, God is already at home in each of us. The miracle of tonight is that God's birth into our hearts, into our souls and into our lives is not dependent on our belief or our goodness or anything else. Even when there is no room in the inn, God finds a way to come home to us wherever we happen to be.

Likewise, may we all come home to God in some way tonight - leaving here with a renewed sense of security, peace and joy. Whether you're here for the first time or for the millionth; whether you feel far from home, exiled to a foreign land or whether you feel carried in the very heart of God; whether you yearn for a new home or rejoice in the familiarity of the home you've always known... may this moment, this place, this meal, these people... be home for you tonight.