

**SERMON- Christmas Day (B)**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

Isaiah 62:6-12

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

**Good Shepherd**  
**December 25, 2020**

Psalm 97

**OPENING:**

“Are you going home for Christmas?”

Such a simple question that has taken on new significance this year, as has everything.

“Are you going home for Christmas?”

The answer to that question for the Holy Family would have been a partial “Yes.”

Joseph had been forced to travel to his birthplace in Bethlehem on account of the Roman census.

Mary, meanwhile, might have answered by gritting an affirmative through her teeth about “going home for Christmas.” In the later stage of pregnancy, she might be wondering why SHE had to travel the 80 some miles to her in-laws. All because Joseph needed to pay his taxes.

The marriage seems to have already gotten off to a rough start.

It’s rougher, of course, because the nature of her pregnancy; God knows the conversations that were going on between the two newly betrothed!

Think of the arguments you have had with your spouse or family this year or any year about “going home for Christmas” and then think about how much more complex they were for the young Mary and Joseph. Questions of legitimacy, social shame, and then on top of it, this perilous, uncomfortable, unnecessary journey to Bethlehem, to satiate the Roman Emperor’s ego and the needs of the Empire.

The innocuous: “are you going home for Christmas?” becomes a lightning rod of tension and discord, theological quandary and historical controversies.

The question might not be quite as perilous for us this year, but it still is a difficult one to answer/ ask.

SO:... “Are your kids able to visit?” “Are you going back home?” “Are you getting together with folks for the holidays?” These are now loaded questions involving real-life health concerns and the ever-present political arguments

This all on top of the normal family customs and habits and tensions that meet us this time of year. “Are you going home for Christmas?” is a lot to ask.

## **BUECHNER**

A story—and one more mention of the author and pastor Frederick Buechner this year. Buechner is a prolific writer and theologian who pops up, I know, in a fair amount of Christine and I’s sermons. I used his sermon the “Stewardship of Pain” a few months back where you might remember a young Buechner clutching his alcoholic father’s car keys under his pillow as a boy.<sup>1</sup>

This story comes from when Buechner was living in New York city as a 20-something in the 1950s. It was a December morning and he heard a sermon from the renowned preacher George Buttrick.

In the sermon, Buttrick talked about something *he* had overheard the previous Sunday leaving the church. He overheard someone asking another person our very question: “Are you going home for Christmas?”

Buechner writes: “I can almost see Buttrick with his glasses glittering in the lectern light as he peered out at all those people listening to him in that large, dim sanctuary and asked it again:

‘Are you going home for Christmas?’-and (he) asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to my eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.”<sup>2</sup>

“Are you going home for Christmas?” There was something in the way that Buttrick delivered it, and that Buechner heard it, that changed his life forever. In fact, Buechner cites that question as the reason he that decided to head off to Seminary the next year and devote his life to the ministry.

Looking for ‘Home’, Buechner set out to find it in the answer to that powerful question.

## **CHRISTMAS DAY:**

Now I know that some of you are double-dipping like myself and attended last night’s service in addition to today. But, not to play favorites, let’s go ahead and give special shout out, a Christmas gift if you will, to those who avoid the Christmas Eve service from last night to enjoy this service on Christmas Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Audio: [The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Pentecost, November 15, 2020 - YouTube](#); Text: [SERMON-Proper-28-A-November-15-2020.pdf \(good-shepherd.net\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner. 2006. “The Longing for Home” in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 234.

Those of you tuning in particularly for today have some of the “true Christmas spirit” because, I suspect, maybe last night is a little too much planning and production with the beautiful music and, usually, the Christmas pageant, and all the people. Instead, similar to that 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas, you prefer the simplicity, the stripped-down version of this service, to the pomp and planning of last night.

You are then like the Holy Family.

Because it assuredly was not in Mary’s ‘birth plan’ to travel 80 some miles in the last trimester. It was not in Joseph’s plans to show up back home with his new not-quite bride, already great with child. But they both make it work despite it all

They made it home for Christmas because in the words of the great Yiddish proverb: “If you want to hear God laugh, tell him all your plans.”

If given the choice, the *plan* for the Messiah was not baby in a manger.

If given the choice, the *plan* for the Incarnation might have had a bit more majestic setting.

If given the choice, the welcoming party would not have been these illiterate shepherds from the field over.

But our *planning* ultimately does not matter, our best efforts are just not what achieves Christmas. Even in the best of years, we were never really able to plan our way into it. God is the one doing the work all along, coming to us, making “home” for us in the most miraculous way possible

## **CHRIST**

Christmas sermons can be saccharine, a little schmaltzy.

With that in mind, remember that coffee commercial from *Folgers* that used to run *ad nauseam* over the holiday. You have seen it, it’s where the college aged son named “Peter” comes home on Christmas morning, unbeknownst to his family, and puts on a fresh cup of (you guessed it) *Folgers* coffee. The aroma wakes up the whole family who celebrate now that everyone has come home for Christmas.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe that image is still what you are looking for, that me saying all this metaphysical stuff about Christ coming home to you, does not cut it, and instead you just simply want your family here, home.

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<sup>3</sup> [Folger's Coffee "Peter Comes Home For Christmas" Full Length - YouTube](#)

If that's the case, know that Christ knew what you meant. That he spent his life and ministry homeless, never actually tender enough with his own family who raised him, with "never a place to rest his head" during his ministry<sup>4</sup>, in a world that did not know him or recognize him (according to John's Gospel), in a world where he would pay the price for coming home to it.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Still the answer to the question: "Are you going home for Christmas?" is "I am already there."

I can say then a loud:

"Merry Christmas, welcome to the Church of the Good Shepherd, and know that you are HOME."

You are home, not because where you are viewing this service from, or who is around you, or even because you belong to this particular Church community. You are home for Christmas because Christ has come home to you, and to me, and all of us.

Again, Christmas sermons can tend towards the overly sweet but gosh do we need to hear that message of good news.

So, know that you are home, you have made it Bethlehem, the angels are here with you, so are the shepherds, and the ox and the ass and whoever else needs to be.

It does not matter what we did to make all that happen, God made it happen, God figured it out. A pregnant virgin, a worldwide census, Old Testament prophecies, iffy travel arrangements.... God made it work.

So, if you are surrounded by family, or by your lonesome. If the tree is better than ever, or if the Christmas cards did not get sent. God has made it happen, by the mystery of the Incarnation, by the reality of what we celebrate on this day.

You are home because Christ is with you.

**AMEN**

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 9.58

<sup>5</sup> John 1.10, 14.17, 16.3

