

CHRISTMAS EVE, YEAR B, DECEMBER 24, 2023

Every year the week before Christmas there are constant news updates about travelling conditions for the holiday. Whether it is weather conditions or flight delays we are inundated with the latest numbers of people who are travelling for the Christmas holiday and all the woes that goes with it. It's a wonder we go through all the headaches of travelling when we know it is extra difficult at Christmas time. Why do we do it every year? We press our way through mobbed airports, jammed highways and long lines at toll booths just to get to the place where we belong by Christmas. As one weary passenger said it's because more than anything you want to be united for the holidays with your loved ones. There is a desire to go home for Christmas. Hopefully, most everyone is home now, or at least where they ought to be and here we are, safe and warm inside, ready to celebrate this Holy Night.

This desire to be home for Christmas is the essential ingredient of Christmas. Why? Because I believe home is at the center of the Christmas story. It is the true meaning of Christmas. I say that because the birth of Jesus was a homing event. It is the story of two peasant people on the road who needed a room to rest for the night and whose son was placed in a feeding trough. It is also a story which was written to help us understand the Incarnation—that is, the coming of God to us, God's willingness to make a home in human life and in the world. As the phrase in the hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem puts in succinctly, "O come to us, abide in us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Emmanuel simply means, "God with us." The story of this night is a story about God with us, God coming to us, making a home in the life of humanity. We hear the story of the city of David, Bethlehem, but that is about a place. What Luke is really trying to tell us is a story about home and about God's eternal willingness to come to us, wherever we are, to enter into the story of the world, to surprise us and bless us and make us feel at home wherever we may find ourselves, in our own houses, or thousands of miles away. Our real home, for Luke, is in the heart of God.

Tonight, we celebrate God's promise of hope that the Christ child can be born again and again and again into our hearts, our lives and the various places we call home if we only make room for him.

There is an apocryphal story that Miriam Wright Edelman told. "It was Christmas Eve and the pews at New York City's Riverside Church were packed. The Christmas pageant was underway and had come to the point at which the innkeeper was to turn away Mary and Joseph with the resounding line, "There's no room at the inn!" (never mind there is no innkeeper in the scripture passage – it is only our imagination that has added him.) Now the innkeeper was played by Tim, a youth of the congregation with Down syndrome. He had only one line to remember: "There's no room at the inn!" He had practiced it again and again with his parents and the pageant director and seemed to have mastered it.

So, Tim stood at the altar, bathrobe costume firmly belted over his stomach, as Mary and Joseph made their way down the center aisle. They approached him, said their lines as rehearsed, and waited for his reply. Tim's parents, the pageant director, and the whole congregation almost leaned forward as if willing him to remember his line.

"There's no room at the inn!" Tim boomed out, just as he rehearsed. But then, as Mary and Joseph turned away on cue to travel further, Tim suddenly yelled out "Wait!" They turned back, startled, along with the congregation and looked at him in surprise. Tim shouted out, "You can stay at my house!"

Ms. Edelman continues that, Tim had so effectively preached the Christmas Eve message at Riverside Church that the venerable and renowned pastor William Sloan Coffin strode to the pulpit, said "Amen," and sat down. It was the best sermon he never had to preach.

However, this apocryphal story begs the question for all of us. Do you and I have room for Jesus in our lives? Will we invite him into our homes or do we speak our lines in church on cue and then turn away. Or do you see this day as a day of hope and possibilities? For me this day is about hope. I believe we could all use a little more hope - the hope that our lives can be different, that our jobs, our relationships, our country even our world can be different if we learn to let Christ just a little further into our lives and into our hearts. What could happen if we just let the Christ child, the great gift of love that he is intended to be, into our homes?

The promise of Christmas is the promise that God has come to us as a babe in a manger to bring us this hope. God has come to woo us and show us something of how and who God really is. Do we welcome him, do we open our hearts and lives to receive him? Do we recognize the impact that he can have on our lives especially when we feel dejected, rejected, alone or afraid.

There's another story of a three year old girl named Annie who was fascinated by her family's creche set. It was an old and fragile set that had been handed down and Annie wanted to hold the baby Jesus in her hands but was told she could not because it was so fragile. When her uncle came to visit she took him by the hand to see the family's porcelain Nativity scene. She pointed to the baby Jesus in the crib and said, "See!" Her uncle asked her, "Do you know what that is?" Her face beamed. "Yes!" Annie said. "Breakable!"

Yes, breakable. Part of what makes Christmas so special is that God loved the world so much God sent Jesus into a broken world to be vulnerable. All of us in our "brokenness" have a God with whom we can identify. We can find comfort in the fact that Jesus was born among us and lived as one of us. He experienced problems, he suffered pain, he felt rejection, he endured grief, he faced death. This little baby, whose birth we celebrate tonight, was born so that we might know God and so that we might know that God knows, loves and understands us and wants us to find our home in him.

Little Annie reminds us that Christmas is about Jesus who came into a broken world, became broken, so that we, in all of our brokenness could find our home in him and reach out to others in their brokenness and help them find wholeness. This is the greatest gift any of us can give to others

Tonight, God makes this promise to everyone with ears to hear, whether in a crowded church, lying in a hospital bed, walking the street hungry and homeless or snug at home. God comes in the words we have heard, in the carols we have sung and in the Sacrament we are about to share.

This night, God invites us to come home again. Not in the sense that anywhere in this world is our home, but that our true home is in God. Tonight, and always, let us be spirited by great hope and great action. For a most excellent hope is born tonight. As

the hymn says, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let every heart prepare a room." Let us prepare our hearts once again to welcome the Christ child again and again and again into our lives. As we sing and pray together this Christmas let us say in the depths of our hearts, "I will arise and go home to God." Hallelujah, Emmanuel! Amen.