



SAINT LUKE'S

“WELCOME HOME”

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD

ISAIAH 9:2-7

PSALM 96

TITUS 2:11-14

LUKE 2:1-20

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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Our world is pretty messed up this Christmas. I expect most of us can agree about that even if we might not agree about exactly how to fix it, or what to fix first. God's love for us shown in Jesus' birth certainly has many policy and political implications but that is not where our focus will be tonight. Tonight we begin with a baby and a stable. God always starts with individual people and the personal, and tonight you and I are the object of God's desire. Since we can't find our way to God all by ourselves, God comes to us. In Jesus, God jumps all in with our human condition. Tonight God invites us to do the same. God invites us to give up the position of observer and bystander and move from a safe distance outside into God's family.

Everyone of us - younger and older, richer and poorer, all political affiliations and none - seek a place called Home at Christmas time. There are lots of songs about coming home for Christmas, and this is why. Even if our childhood memories of Christmas are painful ones, every human heart longs for a place, and community, where we are loved and welcome just as we are. The world needs more of that.

When I was 13 years old, my best friend in high school spent one Christmas recovering from serious back surgery. My friend was born with spina bifida and was going through a painful (and at the time, radically new) surgical treatment which involved putting a titanium rod in her back. She was only the sixth person in Britain to have this procedure. It involved being in traction for weeks. She was so brave. Even though she was 13, the only place available for her for rehab. after

surgery was a nursing home an hour's drive from her family's home. That Christmas morning, my father drove me out to visit my friend in that nursing home – the only person under 65 in the whole place, surrounded by elderly folks. She was there for months. Despite being in pain and with more surgeries in her future, all my friend talked about that Christmas morning was her wonderful new friends in the nursing home were and how great the nursing staff were. As my father drove us home for our traditional Christmas family gathering with our large extended family all I could think about that Christmas Day was my friend's gratitude, and how she created a home for Christmas exactly where she was.

Jesus himself wasn't home for Christmas. Mary and Joseph are in transit for a Roman census. They are dependent on the kindness of strangers in Bethlehem. The innkeeper's kindness doesn't go as far as to find a woman in labor a bed inside the inn. HoweverMary is welcome to use the stable. This is the world we know: makeshift, imperfect, conditionality, the best we can do. Like the innkeeper, well-meaning people notice and care about the needs of the poor – but only so much. Or they (we) can only do so much in the sea of human needs.

However, God is great at making do with whatever is at hand and so the home of animals becomes God's home. In a world of posturing, strident speeches and grandstanding, God chooses the opposite. One of the reasons God chooses a stable is so none of us need feel embarrassed by our own modest circumstances or intimidated by God's grandeur.

Angels – messengers - are needed tonight because although a Messiah is expected, one like Jesus and one born *this* way is not.

All of us are invited to God's modest home. We are not invited only if we meet certain criteria. We are invited no matter how we feel about ourselves. Every single one of us is *equally* welcome. This is so different to the ways of our world that it is hard to really take it in. In God's home, there is no distinction between king and shepherd, except that the shepherds come first. The shepherds are not told by the angels to clean up, shave, comb their hair and change their clothes to be fit to enter in. (Like so many in our world tonight, the shepherds wouldn't have any decent clothes to change into anyway). Poverty is something we are called to help change, but God's welcome does not depend on fine clothing or any material things.

Yet even the shepherds have to *choose* to go to the Stable. They may be the first to know, but the shepherds still have to decide to walk the two miles down the hill and into Bethlehem. Jesus' birth cannot be experienced by sitting around thinking and talking about it, only by going and seeing; by joining the little community in the stable. The kings or wise men (scholars) have to travel much further. We might hear that as symbolic. It can be harder for kings and sophisticated people to get there. It can be harder for people of privilege to welcome news of God's love and compassion for all. Yet God will also embrace the kings in their finery just as God welcomes the shepherds in their raggedy smelly tunics.

It is not only the kings who live in a far off country. We have all known far off countries that are not home. Far off countries where acceptance and love and welcome are conditional at best. We know what it is like to live in the country called conditional: you are loved and worthy of love if...you are successful, wealthy, intelligent, well-educated, beautiful, young. You are welcome *if*.....your life is in order, your relationships are glossy and perfect. You are welcome *if*....The stable is home because we can come as we are. Isn't that what home is? Home is the place, the people, who embrace us when we are at our most vulnerable and worn out and weakest. And even when we are at our most hurt or envious or resentful or angry or pushing loved ones away - we are welcome then too. God does not give up looking for us, eagerly waiting for us to come Home.

The question is: Are we willing to enter in? Are we willing to be the beloved? The world can change, one transformed heart at a time. Can we hear our own belovedness and then hear God's call to share with others that they too are the beloved?

God invites each of us to make a new beginning with God and God's family tonight. There is a place for you. You *are* home for Christmas. Welcome home, beloved.

AMEN

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