



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 1:18-25; Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, December 18, 2015
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

In this Christmas Season, O God, we come here this morning to be reminded of your love, your gift of grace, your incarnation. We come to be reminded again of your advent and your mysterious coming into the world in Bethlehem but also into our world. So, startle us again with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Where will you spend Christmas this year? Such an exchange is common this time of year. I still remember when Carlisle and I were in Basal, Switzerland for Christmas, our first Christmas away from home. It was tough. Locations change and special people, parents, relatives and friends die. But we still have this longing for home.

Frederick Buechner was a young man searching and he found himself in church, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, in the middle of December in New York City. The preacher was George Buttrich. Buttrich told of hearing someone ask a friend as they were leaving church the previous Sunday, “Are you going home for Christmas?” Buechner says he can still see Buttrich leaning over the pulpit and asking the congregation, “Are you going home for Christmas?” The question, the way he asked it writes Buechner, brought tears to my eyes. In his quest to get home, he entered Union Seminary and became a minister and writer.

Are you going home for Christmas? We are afraid to dare the homeward search for fear there is no home for us, no place that we belong, no place where our gifts are appreciated and used. We are tired of running here and there to make a place for ourselves.

The idea of home, and homecoming, is at the heart of great literature, from the *Odyssey* to *Look Homeward, Angel*, and great music, from Dvorak’s magnificent Ninth Symphony, *From the New World*, with its haunting Largo we know as “Going Home,” to spirituals first sung by slaves violently wrenched from their homes and villages—“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin’ for to Carry Me Home”—and, of course, popular songs such as “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” written in 1943 when millions of young Americans were far from home, scattered all over a world at war. Then you can hear a recording by Bing Crosby singing:

I’ll be home for Christmas
You can count on me. . . .
Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams.
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams.

Six centuries before the birth of Jesus, God’s people were dreaming of home. The Babylonians had defeated their nation, devastated their holy city, Jerusalem, leveled God’s temple, and driven the people across the desert to live in Babylonian captivity, exiles. In Babylon, God’s people longed to go home; they remembered how it used to be at home in Jerusalem. They sang the old songs. They told the old stories to their children every evening. One of their psalmists wrote what I think may be the most poignant sentences in the Bible:

By the rivers of Babylon —
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion. . . .
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137)

It is the theme of the great Advent hymn:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here.

And then a letter arrived in the exile community, written by one of their greatest poets, a prophet who somehow remained back in burned-out Jerusalem. The letter he wrote begins at the fortieth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah with words made familiar not only because we read them every Advent, but because George Frideric Handel chose them to introduce his oratorio *Messiah*:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

The prophet paints a vivid picture: a highway will be built across the desert, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough places will be smooth—and over that highway, a procession will move. Banners and trumpets will announce the coming of the king, returning to Jerusalem. “Get you to the high mountain,” the herald commands. “Lift up your voice; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

Friends, we can go home again. There is one who speaks tenderly and gathers up all who stumble and fall, all who are sick, all who labor and are heavily burdened, all who are weary, sad, all who are mourning, ill and frightened, all whose illness is critical and final, all who are anxious and worried, all who are discouraged and depressed, all who are alone and lonely and homesick. One is coming who gathers them all up and gently leads them—all of them, all of us—home.

Jesus knew what it was like to seek a home. Scripture tells us he had no place to lay his head. Soon after his birth his parents had to flee Egypt. God has made a home for us and he wants us to make a home for all God’s children. That’s what God’s Gift Shop is all about. It’s about providing homes whether it’s through One80 Place or Thornwell, or missions abroad. There are ways that you can provide a home.

Let me share something with you that captured the spirit of God’s dwelling among us in the midst of the darkness around us. We have been seeking to find ways to support the family members of the nine victims of the Mother Emanuel Nine who were shot down on June 17, 2014. Maggie Beamguard working with the Prayer Shawl Ministry of First (Scots) offered to give Pocket Prayer Shawls to each member. We gave them to the chaplains and they put them in the hands of the family members. Almost immediately I got a message from one of the chaplains, “They are so thankful for the pocket prayer shawls and this means so much to them to have this reminder that you are with them with your prayers.”

I shared their heartfelt gratitude with some of the group in an email. Listen to Judy Murdock's response:

Joe, is this not amazing that something so simple as women knitting or crocheting 4 x 4 inch pieces of yarn can bring comfort to the families of those going through this trial for the killer of their loved ones? It has to be so difficult to listen to and see all the details. We in spirit are there hugging and surrounding them. But because we cannot be there we send these symbols of our love to them. It is so fulfilling that we can feel we are reaching out in some way and can help them in their time of such difficulty. My soul sings that in some small way we could be of help.

Judy

"Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people," says your God.

God has not deserted us. God is with us. And God has given to us that opportunity to make that Good News known to others, that their lives might be enriched, that they may have hope.

Rachel is an eleven year-old with Down Syndrome. Whenever she and her family travel she gets nervous. But her mother says that after Rachel has been in a place for a couple of days, and begins to feel comfortable, she gets up in the morning, puts her hands on her hips and says, "Home now, home now."

Wherever you find yourself this Christmas, God invites you to come home now. O little town of Bethlehem, to see this thing that has come to pass, call his name Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

You have a home and you have an opportunity to make a home for others. Wherever you may wander, wherever you may roam, listen to the story that says, "Home now, home now." Amen.