

Some years ago I was surprised to learn that the most popular American song ever written is Irving Berlin's "White Christmas."ⁱ That old sentimental tune seems to reach deep into our spirits. I'm sure you have heard it too, in these recent weeks of 'muzak' on the radio and in the stores. Just for fun – sing it with me – don't be shy, you don't need the words...

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know...

Berlin wrote "White Christmas" in 1941, and it became in many ways a "theme song for American soldiers separated from their families a long way from home." You can picture it – soldiers on long train rides through the night in packed passenger cars – all going 'home for Christmas.' Perhaps the most beautiful words – "home for Christmas" – it must have bound those soldiers together, by their "overwhelming hunger – for home."

Home – the word resonates immensely. "There is no place like home." "I'll be home for Christmas." In Robert Frost's famous words, "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." It gives us a sense of roots. It is the place where I belong. Home somehow gets lodged in our memories, as if it is forever, even if it only exists "in old photographs or family stories" now.

At least in the lore of Christmas, "many of our best memories are built around being home for Christmas." It touches all our senses: the smell of evergreen trees, the sounds of familiar carols, the chatter of voices, the crinkle of packages, the tastes of homemade sweets, talk of Santa Claus coming. And yet, "home" at Christmas can stir up mixed emotions of reconnecting...and it is a time of intense grief for many. Dean Llyod of Washington National Cathedral fame wrote: "All Christmas sentimentality makes us aware of what is missing in our lives now, or what was never there at all. There are reminders of loved ones who are gone, of happy family times when everyone is together, and of the happiness that never quite happened."

Our world continues to be "a place of homelessness." There are war-torn areas around the globe, hundreds of thousands who call refugee camps 'home' but have no prospect of seeing their homeland again. And "blocks from here homeless shelters are filled with people who have lost their home." "...Our own little planet is seemingly less and less like a secure home all the time." It feels like we are a long way off from building a home on this earth that is big enough, and generous enough, to house every religion, nation, and people.

The Christmas story – we know it by heart – a young Jewish woman and her husband travel for days to Bethlehem to have their names registered for the Roman census. When they arrive there is no room for them in the inn, so that they stay in the area where the animals were kept on cold winter nights. There the young woman gives birth to her baby.

It is striking, isn't it, that when God comes into our world, there is no room. The proud Empire treats them like refugees or immigrants. Not unlike today. Our world is busy with wars and elections, and worries about the economy. People are running so fast trying to grasp security and happiness, only to find it out of reach. We avert our eyes from the struggles of those looking for a home.

The Christmas story is about the God of the universe making a home here on earth. It tells of the child who became a man who showed unstoppable love for everyone – his friends, the strangers he met, for the least and the lost – it didn't matter who you were – he loved and challenged and confronted them all, and then on one terrible day, he died for them.

The message the angels declared – "Behold I bring you good news for *all* people..."news that has come into the world to bring hope to *everyone*; to lead *everyone* to find a *home*. We can imagine

that this made Herod, the local governor for the Roman Empire, very nervous. For this home God has in mind of creating cannot happen without the wealthy and the powerful opening their hearts and their resources to build a more generous world. And this makes politicians very nervous.

Christians came to see this savior as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Price of Peace. God has taken on human flesh. The gospel of John says that 'God had pitched his tent with the human race' – to show us a way home, to the one home that will never fail us. "By sending Jesus," writes Dean Lloyd, "God had in mind a massive remodeling of our home – making it wider, more welcoming, more open to absolutely everyone. That remodeling was to start with a handful of disciples, and now with you and me."

And here we are - God has taken on human flesh. God is dwelling in our lives and calling us to be part of building a home big enough for everyone. Jesus, the Price of Peace, is calling us to listen, to reach across the gulfs that separate us, to break down barriers that divide us, to work for peace and justice, to feed the hungry, and shelter the lost.

Why are we here this Christmas morning? My guess is because, like me and everyone else, you are longing for home, for ourselves and for the lost and homeless world – the home that will never fail us, the one God is calling us to make. "And somewhere deep down inside we know that we [cannot] find that home ourselves; home is going to have to find us."

And this is precisely "why we are glad-hearted people." We are here so that Christ will feed us with the holy bread and cup of salvation, the bread and wine of his love. And we sing favorite songs of the Christmas season, enthusiastically and meditatively. "And for a few moments here, with Christ and each other, we know our real home."

Emmanuel. God with us. Home.

ⁱ "Home for Christmas" a sermon by The Very Rev. Samuel T. Lloyd, II, Dean of Washington National Cathedral, Christmas Eve, 2007. This sermon quotes and paraphrases the themes in Lloyd's sermon.