

Home for Christmas
Luke 2:1-20
First Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve 2019

Where is home for you?

How many call Hickory, "home?"

For how many is home someplace else?

I'm not sure where home is for me.

I was born and grew up in Atlanta...

I attended three different universities

(but that's another story)...

moved to Louisville, KY. in my 20's for seminary

and that's where I have lived the longest

– twenty-seven years...

then, in Ames, Iowa for almost five...

and finally here in Hickory for more than eight.

And yeah, for you math whizzes that means I'm old!

So, where is home?

For some of us that's hard to answer.

It wasn't hard for the ancient Israelites, though.

For them, Jerusalem was home;

not just Jerusalem, but the Temple in Jerusalem.

"How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD...

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise...

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere."¹

It is a homecoming song...

a song sung by excited pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem,
making their way home.

There is something about the holidays, I think –

something about the month-or-so of days

between Thanksgiving and Christmas

that stirs all this up in us –

whether it's memories of home

with the familiar sights and sounds,

smells and people that made it home.

Or whether it's a *longing* for home...

for the old and familiar spaces,

and for the people who are there or once were there.

¹ Psalm 84

Some of us ache for a family
now separated by miles or by death or by deep hurts...
the family we once knew and still miss so much.

So perhaps the question is not so much,
“Where is home for you?”
as it is “WHAT is home for you?”²
“WHAT does home mean to you?”

Willie Baronet asked this question
of hundreds of people experiencing homelessness.

He was haunted by what to do
whenever he came upon a person with a sign
begging for money at intersections.

Sometimes he would simply divert his eyes...
other times he would nod politely and drive off.

Sometimes he emptied out the change in his ash tray
and paid his “guilt insurance.”

Then he had an idea!

One day he drove up to a man standing at the intersection
with a sign he had obviously worked hard on.

Willie rolled down his window and said,
“Excuse me, sir, can I buy your sign?”

“My sign?” said the man. “You want to buy my sign?”

“Yeah, how much do you want for it?”

“\$10?” the guy asked.

“That sign worth more than that—
obviously you put some time into it... how about \$20?”

This led to a “go-fund me” initiative
that enabled Willie Baronet

to travel from California to New York
meeting people begging for money along the way... buying

their signs...
and just talking to them about their lives
and how they wound up where they were.

He bought hundreds of signs
and put them together in an art display in New York.

Along the way he asked each person,
“What does home mean to you?”

And when Willie Baronet finished his project,
he entitled the exhibition, “We Are All Homeless.”³

² Joseph Clifford in a sermon “How Can I Keep from Singing: Home,” Myers Park Presbyterian Church, November 17, 2019.

³ For more information visit: weareallhomeless.org. Willie Baronet is also all over YouTube.

Because what he found in hundreds of conversations
is that at a deep level, we all long for the same things.
Whether well-housed or not,
we all want security, safety, warmth,
a place to rest, a place of welcome.
We want a place where we are known,
a place where we're not invisible.
Baronet learned that homelessness
is not only the physical state having nowhere to lay your head...
but a spiritual reality of the human condition.
Theologically, we all live in an exile of sorts...
we all long for home...
which for me is another way of saying we all long for God.
"You have made us for Yourself,"
prayed St. Augustine in the Fourth Century –
"You have made us for Yourself,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

You may be aware that over the last few years,
nations around the world have been studying loneliness.
It turns out that loneliness
is now a huge public health concern...
some say it is an epidemic.
In Japan, lonely deaths among the elderly
have a name, "Kodokushi."
In 2017, a British Commission on Loneliness
found that 9 million people
(14 percent of the population of Great Britain)
often or always feel lonely.
In January of 2018 – just a year ago –
Prime Minister Theresa May
appointed that country's first Minister for Loneliness.
It is estimated that "loneliness" costs U.K. employers
up to \$3.5 billion annually...
and according to the Harvard Business Review,
social isolation is "associated with a reduction in lifespan
similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day."⁴
Studies of loneliness in the United States
find that nearly half of us sometimes or always feel alone.
Only half of us report
having meaningful in-person conversation with a friend

⁴ Tara John, "How the World's First Loneliness Minister Will Tackle 'the Sad Reality of Modern Life,'" in *Time Magazine*, April 25, 2018.

or quality time with family on a daily basis.
And Generation Z (adults ages 18-22)
is now being called the loneliest generation.⁵

Friends, I realize this may seem odd territory
to cover on Christmas Eve night...
so let me hasten to say two things I believe deeply.
First, our true 'home' is where Christ is.
Augustine is right when he prays:
"You have made us for Yourself,
and our hearts ARE restless until they rest in You."
Home, ultimately, is where Christ is.
And on this night...
regardless of the address or geography of the thing...
home is represented by that simple manger
where we know we belong,
where we know once again the strong, saving news
that there is One who loves the world so much
as to be born into it.

So, home is where Christ is...
AND... we are the Body of Christ.
You and me... your family and mine...
this congregation or whatever congregation you are a part of...
we are the Body of Christ.
And now knowing how many lonely people
there are in the world today –
we have kingdom work to do...
we have a mission, my friends...
a true calling as those whose home is with Christ
to provide a place – and be a people –
where others can come home to.
I'm remembering the wonderful talk
by Joe Clifford at our Stewardship Dinner this past October.
He talked about the parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory –
with every character (the man in the ditch,
the priest and Levite, the Samaritan) –
with every character representing someone or something else.
And then, he asked us about the inn in the parable?⁶
What does the inn

⁵ Cigna.newshq.businesswire.com

⁶ From Origen of Alexandria's allegorical interpretation of the parable.

(to which the Samaritan took the man)...
what does the inn represent?
And, Joe said, that's the church –
where Christ brings the wounded of the world
that we might care for one another...
truly see each other...
have compassion for one another...
refusing to leave each other in the ditch all alone,
but sharing what we have with each other.
Home – our true home – is wherever Christ is.
And by his grace and the gift of his Spirit,
Christ is here in his church.

Anne Lamott tell a story her pastor, Veronica, once told.
That when she was about seven,
her best friend got lost one day.
“The little girl ran up and down the streets
of the big town where they lived,
but she couldn't find a single landmark.
She was scared half to death,
when a policeman stopped to help her.
He put her in the passenger seat of his car,
and they drove around and around her neighborhood
until she finally saw her church.
She pointed it out to the policeman,
and then she told him firmly,
'You can let me out now.
This is my church,
and I can always find my way home from here.’”⁷

Friends, home is where Christ is –
and tonight (regardless of address or geography)...
tonight home is a simple manger scene
where we know we belong...
where we meet the One who loves the world so much
as to never give up on it,
loves the world so much
as to continue to work for its redemption and peace.
Wherever we live... home is with Christ and his people –
where we know we are loved
and cared for and never forgotten—

⁷ Ann Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

and ultimately, safe, whole, and at peace.⁸

⁸ John Buchanan in a sermon "Just Like the One I Used to Know," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL., December 8, 2002