



Christmas from the Backside:
“LET’S HAVE AN EARLY CHRISTMAS!”

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Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

This past Friday evening the Adrian College Choir performed here in our sanctuary. We heard a wonderful composition by a choir member called “Snow,” which evoked the beauty of a silent, gentle snowfall. It certainly put me in the mood for Christmas. Another young man performed “White Christmas” on the tuba. I was taken back in my memories to snowy nights in the deep countryside where I grew up, and also reminded of how I taught myself to sing. I would put Bing Crosby’s record on and sing along to “Don’t Fence Me In” and “White Christmas.”

You may be surprised to learn that “White Christmas” is the most popular song ever written. With apologies to Taylor Swift and Charles Wesley, “White Christmas” has been recorded more, sung and played more, listened to more, than any other piece of music ever. Irving Berlin knew he had struck a golden chord as soon as he’d finished writing it. In 1941, the next morning he told his colleagues, “Fellas, I just wrote the best song in the history of the world!”

And maybe he did. All of us here could probably join in and sing it all the way through without having the words in front of us. Even if we grew up never knowing snow, the words conjure up an image of Christmas that tugs at our hearts:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know
Where the tree tops glisten
And children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow.
I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
With every Christmas card I write.
May your days be merry and bright
And may all your Christmases be white.

I wish I could sing it for you like Bing did, but my voice isn't up to it this morning.

The power of this song highlights a longing for home within us that we cannot suppress. But it's really a longing for more than our earthly home, or remembered Christmases past.

Every year you hear complaints about how Christmas is getting too commercialized and how the Christmas "card" is played earlier and earlier every year. Sometimes it's hard to get through all the trappings of Christmas to get to the spiritual core. We're weary of the commercial hype before we get to Christmas day. I'm reminded of a gift I once received where I unwrapped a big box only to find another wrapped box and then another and then another, about five in all before I actually got to the present inside – a box that was empty. With months of sales pressure leading up to the "day," Christmas can feel very empty. Many years it's hard to get through all the Christmas wrappings to uncover the spiritual core. But surely not in our hearts. In here, we yearn for a Christmas that can't get here soon enough.

It's the deep yearning, you see, for a Savior. A Messiah. One who will heal our souls and bring us joy beyond all deserving. I think any mature, reflective person recognizes this need within themselves. It is the recognition that on our own we can never make things right. In any given week, we can have regrets that will stay with us for the rest of our lives. A Savior is who we need.

Six centuries before Christ, the worst thing that could happen to a nation happened to God's people. Engaged in a war with the most powerful nation in the world, their armies were defeated and pushed back to Jerusalem by the overwhelming superiority of Babylon. A long siege took place and finally collapse. The city's walls were breached, the city overrun. And then the looting, pillaging, killing. The Babylonians leveled the city, making sure that every single wall of Solomon's Temple – Judah's heart and soul – was destroyed. Then they assembled all the leaders, the politicians, priests, and lawyers and marched them across the desert to Babylon, where they were kept in captivity for seventy years.

It's called "The Exile," and during those long years, when a whole generation died and another came of age, the people longed for home, told stores about how it used to be in sweet home Jerusalem, sang songs about home, told the children every night at bedtime about home. The

worst was they feared that God had forgotten about them. It was a time of deep sadness, and the only thing that kept those people from despair was the thought of home and the hope that God had not abandoned them, that God would redeem them and bring them home.

And then a voice is heard. A prophet, a man of exquisite poetic gifts, arises back in Jerusalem and writes a letter to the exiled community in Babylon. We know his words of unexpected hope. We listen to them every Advent season. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined!” And looking far beyond the horizon of Babylon and centuries into the future, Isaiah declares how God will act: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

And for Isaiah, for the people Israel, Christmas – the birth of the Messiah – simply could not come soon enough. We are all waiting. Waiting for a word, a deed, of hopeful love, a word of divine redemption and grace and forgiveness. And, like Israel, we are in some way far, far from home. We have a divine home-sickness. “Homesickness,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, is “God’s tug at our hearts, a kind of homing instinct planted in each of us.”

There is a longing for Christmas which cannot be denied, for it’s our spiritual home. The Ellsworth Kalas book many of our church groups are reading attempts to look at Christmas from unexpected perspectives. Kalas gives one chapter this heading: “Three Cheers for an Early Christmas!” He writes, “Over the centuries, Bible students have found the voices of an early Christmas in Genesis, (in Isaiah, Micah and Job) and through much of the Old Testament.” We’re longing for our true home in Christ. As one wise preacher wrote: “To be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them.” We’re never at home without Christ and the peace Christ brings within us.

Friends, there is One who welcomes us home at the end of the day. That is what we anticipate in Advent. A young couple, a man and a woman heavily pregnant, traveling many miles to return home, and when they arrive, making a home, a birth place in a cow stall, transforming a manger into a home to which we all in some way return.

Frederick Buechner remembers how the message of Christ changed his life and saved his soul. He was a young writer in New York, trying to make it in the world of publishing and not doing so well. He started going to church, and heard a fine preacher by the name of George Arthur Buttrick telling a story on a Sunday near Christmas. As he had been leaving church, Dr. Buttrick had overheard someone on the steps asking someone else, “Are you going home for Christmas?” Buechner remembers Buttrick, peering out through his sparkling spectacles at all the people in his church, and asking, “Are you going *home* for Christmas” in a way that brought tears to his eyes. And Buechner realized that the home we ache for – the one home where we’re at peace – is finally, for all of us, the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.

Home is where Christ is – the home to which we return, regardless of the geography of the thing. Home is there, that simple manger scene 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, loves

the world so much as to never give up on it, loves the world so much as to continue to work for redemption and peace in unexpected and surprising ways. That's where we're headed again this Advent: Home. Home, which is where Christ is. Where we know ourselves to be loved, cared for and never forgotten. And it can't come too soon for any of us.

So, once a year we share this burst of glory we call Christmas. Once a year, heaven comes down to earth, at least for a little while. Just as the shepherds were surprised long ago when the darkness of their night was overcome by a dazzling display of angel ecstasy, so our darkness gets dispelled for a while by Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Handel's *Messiah* – and yes, even “White Christmas.” We hang the greens, we exchange gifts, sing carols, and give more attention to the people we love. And surely we show some compassion to those we don't. And then, for at least one evening we forget about our worries, we set aside our cares, and we rejoice in the sheer love of God. And there is that within us that is so eager for Christmas to come, that it cannot come soon enough.

May we pray: Light of the world, burn brightly among us. Come down to the low places and to the people who sit in darkness. Be born into the midst of our sinfulness, our hostility, our struggle, our fear, our confusion, our loneliness, our bitterness, our sorrow, our strife. Be born in the midst of this hard, cold, real world, so that by your love it might be transformed. Be born within us, among us, so that our hardened, jaded hearts might be transformed and carry your light to the world. Be born in our hearts again and bring us home. Amen.