

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

If you've been dreaming of a white Christmas here in Connecticut, it looks as if you'll be disappointed. This incredibly warm weather just isn't conducive to the white stuff! But, that's obviously not the case in Colorado. As you no doubt know, there has been more than enough snow out in Denver. A huge storm dumped well over two feet of snow on the area, and roads and airports were all tied up.

For many folks it couldn't have come at a worse time of year, for cancelled flights meant shuttled plans to be home for Christmas. For several days Denver International Airport looked like a refugee camp. It was completely closed for forty-five hours. Folks caught between flights, or waiting for flights, found a bit of floor or a couple of chairs shoved together, and bedded down the best they could. And, for some of the luckier ones, once things began to clear up a bit, they were able to rent a car and drive to their destination.

One woman, who had been stuck in Denver, spoke to a reporter about how she and her husband and their two children finally got a rental car. "It feels so good to be in control of our own destiny by driving [a] . . . car home rather than be in the hands of the airline gods. . . . We have two kids who have to have [Christmas] . . . at home. We were lucky we had a rental car because they were none left by Thursday," she went on, "We met a couple in keystone who were looking to for used cars to buy so they could drive home to Ann Arbor by Christmas." (*New York Times*, 12-23-06, A-14)

You may have seen the Hallmark ad being run this year promoting their little singing penguins. People stranded in an airport are all being grumpy and rude, when a mom pulls out the musical toy, turns it on, and suddenly, everyone has become best friends! A nice thought, no doubt. But still and all, being stuck in an airport when you want to be home for Christmas is no one's idea of fun. And like the folks going to Ann Arbor, people will go to great lengths to make it happen. That's how important home is to most folks, and how important it is to be there, among family and friends, on a day like Christmas.

Of course, the first Christmas was celebrated away from home. In the old familiar tale we learn that Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem—a five day journey back then—in order to be counted by the Romans in their census.

It was, no doubt, a difficult trip. Mary was in her last days of pregnancy. And the bumpy ride on the back of a donkey must have been incredibly uncomfortable.

When they arrive in Bethlehem, they discovered there was no place for them to stay. No room at the inn. And so they bed down for the night in the stable outback. It

may have been nothing more than a cave—probably lined with straw for the animals. It would have been cold and rather miserable. Hardly a place to settle in for the night—much less to give birth. But it was their home away from home, and they made the best of it.

During the course of the night Jesus was born, and they had some visitors, shepherds, who had heard from a band of angels that their child was to be the Messiah, the very son of God. It is hard to imagine a stranger set of circumstances, but so the story has been told for centuries.

It is, of course, one of the key stories of our faith. It reminds us of the fundamental truth that no matter where we are, God is with us. Even if we are stranded in an airport. Even if we are forced to take up residence in a barn. God is with us. And where God is, no matter what the circumstances, we can be at home.

Pastor Joanna Adams recently took a trip to the place where she grew up. It was a rather unsettling experience for things had changed a bit—as they always seem to do.

“The day was not completely lost,” she writes, “The high point turned out to be a stop at the cemetery, where I visited the grave of a beloved aunt who lived with us for a time when I was young. As I stood . . . beside her grave, a bright butterfly appeared, hovered in the air and then winged its way skyward. It was a sign to me that, in the end, our home is with God, and God’s home is with us...” (*Christian Century*, December 12, 2006, 18)

It is no mere coincidence that one of the most frequently used titles for Jesus in this season of the year is Emmanuel—it means “God with us.” This birth in Bethlehem, far from Nazareth, far from home, is a reminder that God is with us—no matter where we are. And where God is, there is our true home. For our true home is not about a place. It’s not about an address. It is about being at peace in our relationship with God and with others.

But if being at home is not about hopping a flight to the place of our birth, if being at home is not about a particular address, if being at home is about our relationship with God and others—what need we do? How can we be sure we are home for this and every Christmas?

By living our lives as Jesus lived his. By reaching out to those in need. By giving of ourselves to others. By loving our neighbors even as we love ourselves. That’s how we can be at home with God.

Ironically, that may mean helping those who have no physical home find one! It may mean doing something about those who are in a literal sense homeless.

Just last week at an event designed to draw attention to the plight of homeless persons in Bridgeport, various advocates for the homeless called on our community to work for a day when there is no need for shelters, a day when one and all can afford to live in a clean safe home of their own. Janice Kelly, the director of a shelter in Bethel, said, “We don’t need another homeless shelter. We need affordable homes, home for the holiday.” (CT Post, 12-23-06, A-13)

There are so many ways you and I can help make that a reality. There are so many things we can do! Our work with the Interfaith Housing Association, our support of agencies like the Greater Bridgeport Council of Churches, our efforts with Habitat for Humanity, all are designed to make it possible for homeless folks to find a place to rest their weary heads. And in doing that work, work that is supported by our Christmas offering tonight, we do indeed draw closer to our eternal home in God.

Cory Wong lives in Atherton, California, but her home town is in Hawaii. Several years ago, she was a student, and waiting on tables in a small café. She was barely making ends meet. As Christmas drew closer, she realized she would not have enough money to go home. She was crushed.

Five days before Christmas, a gentleman came into the café and Cory waited on him. He sat at the table, not ordering anything, for close to an hour. Finally she approached him and said, “Please let me know if you need anything.” As she was walking away, he spoke in a very soft voice. “I’d like an order of nachos,” he said, “and a glass of water.”

Cory writes: “My heart sank. Nachos were the cheapest thing on the menu which meant I wouldn’t get much of a tip. But maybe this guy was broke, and I sure knew how that felt. So I tried my best to make him feel okay.” (Guideposts, 12-96, 30)

As she gave him the nachos, she told him it was \$2.95. The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a hundred dollar bill and told her to keep the change.

“My eyes opened wide,” writes Cory, “I don’t understand,” she said, “What do you want from me?”

“Not a thing,” he said . . . “Call your mother tonight.” . . . And with a quick Merry Christmas, he left.

When she got to her apartment after her shift, the phone rang. It was her mother. Cory’s brothers, she said, have bought you a ticket so that she can come home for Christmas. But they can’t afford a return ticket. Could you handle it, her mother wondered.

“At that moment,” writes Cory, “a commercial flashed on television. A major airline was announcing cut rate fares to Hawaii, one –way for ninety nine dollars!”

Needless to say Cory got to Hawaii that Christmas, all because of a stranger who had reached out to a lonely looking waitress.

Ever since, Cory notes, she and her husband John have honored that man's generosity, by reaching out to others themselves. They have organized blanket drives for the homeless in their area. They have handed out warm socks. They have left anonymous gifts of food. They have helped those without physical homes, and in doing so, they have drawn closer to the one who is our home.

Sisters and brothers, as we celebrate the birth of Christ, as we sing of the one named Emmanuel, let us never forget, that in God we can find our home away from home. Frederick Buechner writes: "If the holiness . . . of God [was] present in . . . this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too." (The Hungering Dark) And it is true. God's holiness can be found anywhere and everywhere. And in God we are always home for Christmas, where ever we may find ourselves. In a lonely café, in a snowed in airport, at Aunt Ethel's and Uncle Bob's—no matter where we are, we can be at home if we are in relationship to God.

It is incredibly good news. It is worthy of celebration. It is worthy of all that Christmas has to offer.

Welcome home. Welcome home!

**Amen
John H. Danner**