

Matthew 11:2-6

Isaiah 35:1-10

December 11, 2016

Third Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here are the top seven sites that showed up after a Google search of the phrase “going home for Christmas.”

* Going Home for the Holidays: 21 Questions You’ll Be Asked When You Go Home for the Holidays

* Are you worried about going home for the holidays after Trump’s win?

* Top 10 Ways to Survive Going Home for the Holidays

* Is There Anything Stranger than Going Home for the Holidays?

* Going Home for the Holidays — from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth (advice to freshmen going home for the first time since starting college)

* Not going home for the holidays? I *Won’t* Be Home for Christmas — A defense of staying away during the holidays

* We Slacked About Going Home for the Holidays — Weird Parental Ticks [*sic*], Room Snooping, WiFi Passwords

Kind of makes you think twice about going home for Christmas, doesn’t it? Or about the people who might be coming to your house!

When I was checking the news on my iPad Thursday morning and thinking about writing my sermon, I saw an article on FaceBook called “12 Secular Christmas Songs that are Actually About Advent.” The sub-title was “Your no-guilt Advent playlist!” That headline got my attention, so I checked out the playlist: It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas; Silver Bells; Santa Claus is Coming to Town; All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth; All I Want for Christmas is You; Last Christmas; White Christmas; Frosty the Snowman; We Need a Little Christmas; Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer; and It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year. The article’s author writes, “a number of the secular (not even about the birth of Jesus) songs called ‘Christmas’ music should be classified as winter themed music or even Advent music. If you look at the lyrics of many popular Christmas songs, you will discover that they are actually about getting ready for and waiting for Christmas.”¹

If you were keeping count of the songs, you noticed I only named eleven. #12 was “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Earlier in the week, I had already spent some time reading about the history of that familiar Christmas song as I worked on this sermon, so it was particularly interesting to see it listed in a list of secular Christmas songs about Advent. “I’ll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me, please have snow and mistletoe, and presents ‘neath the tree.” The article says, “There are a number of Christmas

songs about wishing for a place or a person, and these are all symbolic of our Advent longing for Jesus to come as a little baby and to come again.”

On October 4, 1943, Bing Crosby recorded “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” which quickly became popular among U.S. troops overseas during World War II. It was the most requested song at USO shows. The lyricist, Kim Gannon, more than once said that he didn’t write the song with soldiers in mind, but that he was “thinking of all people who are unable to be home for Christmas.” At first, Gannon’s song was rejected by the music business because the last line was thought to be too sad: “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.” However, Gannon sang the song for Bing Crosby as they were playing golf, and the rest is history.

The much-beloved Christmas song is very melancholy, and the last line is rather haunting: “if only in my dreams. . .” As one writer has put it, “While the melody is one that lingers in our minds, the meaning of the song is actually quite somber as the closing line reveals that being home for Christmas isn’t quite a reality just yet.”²

It might seem odd to you to hear about a melancholy secular song of longing on this third Sunday of Advent when we light the candle of JOY. And yet, that comment, “being home for Christmas isn’t quite a reality just yet,” expresses very well the tension of these weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas, as well as the challenge of living faithful Christian lives in this “time between the times,” the already but not yet of God’s restoration of his creation and his people when Christ returns at his second Advent.

The prophet Isaiah didn’t preach and write his words for the third Sunday of Advent, but they are often used on this third Sunday of Advent, exactly because they ring out with the joy of going home — and not only going home, but being led home by God himself along God’s highway through the wilderness. Isaiah proclaimed the promise of going home to God’s people who had been away from home for fifty years, languishing in exile in Babylon. Their temple had been destroyed. Their capital city had been laid waste. Their citizens had been carted off to a foreign land and ridiculed. How could they possibly have hope in such a situation? How could they sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

Sunday night, David Sanderson led off the community sing of “Messiah” with maybe his strongest rendition yet of “Comfort Ye My People.” As David’s voice reached a crescendo and filled the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, he sang, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” In other words, God is coming — get ready! This is a word of hope for God’s people — then and now — and sets the tone for the rest of “Messiah.”

That song is based on Isaiah 40:3, but it sounds a lot like Isaiah 35:8 and 10: “A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

The pictures are powerful — the wilderness and the dry land; the desert; the burning sand and the thirsty ground. The wilderness calls to mind God's people wandering in the wilderness for forty years before they made it home to the Promised Land. But it wasn't aimless wandering, nor were they on their own. God was with them all along the way, a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night, showing them the way to go home.

The wilderness calls to mind God's people languishing in exile for fifty years in Babylon, certainly reason for sorrow and sighing. But the prophet's message is one of hope and promise — "Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. He's on his way! He'll save you!"

The wilderness calls to mind the times in our lives when we feel dried up spiritually, when we feel lost, when we can't find our way home. Maybe that's how you feel this morning, even in the midst of all of the holiday hoopla and busyness. Maybe "going home for Christmas" is fraught with anxiety for you, even if you're staying right here in Wallace. Maybe the way the world is today seems to be nothing more than a huge expanse of dry, dusty, barren desert. Where is the hope of the crocus and rose blossoms? Where is the promise of the lush greenery of Carmel and Sharon? Isaiah's message of hope and promise and, yes, even joy comes to us again this Advent — "Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. He's on his way! He'll save you!" It's not a joy that depends on whether or not all of the decorations are put up just right or if all of the Christmas shopping is done on time or the house is just right for the family and friends who are coming home. Instead, the joy of this third Sunday of Advent is rooted in the prophet's proclamation, "They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God."

Two months after Bing Crosby recorded "I'll Be Home for Christmas," the crew of the battleship U.S.S. North Carolina was in the Pacific Ocean near the New Hebrides Islands on Christmas Eve 1943. The crew had been ordered to ship out on Christmas morning to provide support for a carrier attack.

The crew gathered on Christmas Eve for an entertaining show with skits, dances, comedy routines, a fake strip tease, and a drag show with guys wearing wigs made out of manila rope. Can you imagine the melancholy and sense of longing on that battleship that night?

As they enjoyed the show, the crew members had no idea of the surprise that the ship's chaplain, E.P. Wuebbens, had arranged. He had collected \$5 from each sailor who had children at home. The total was \$2,404.25. The chaplain then sent the money to Macy's department store, along with the names and addresses of the 729 children of the crew members. Chaplain Wuebbens asked Macy's to send a \$3 gift to each child, with a card attached that said that the gift was from a loved one and his shipmates on the USS North Carolina. The chaplain wrote to Macy's, "We realize that we are asking a great deal, but . . . you will be adding greatly to the happiness of our children and to our own Christmas joy out here in one of the war zones. Incidentally we hope that a bit of that joy will reflect on you and your staff of workers."

Macy's filled the chaplain's request — and even more! Macy's invited the mothers and children who were able to travel to come to the store. They were filmed opening their presents and sending Christmas hellos and love to their fathers and husbands. When the Christmas Eve skits and comedy bits were finished on that battleship, the lights were dimmed and the movie was shown. In a story in *Our State* magazine about that special Christmas Eve in the South Pacific, Susan Stafford Kelly described "A longing too deep to describe, a homesickness too great to express, a surprise too joyous to ever forget."³

That is the Advent promise today as we think about going home for Christmas. In this time between the times, in this already-but-not yet between Christ's first Advent and his coming again, we experience "a longing too deep to describe, a homesickness too great to express." But we also rejoice at "a surprise too joyous to ever forget."

Courage! Take heart!

God is here, right here, on his way to put things right
and redress all wrongs.

He's on his way! He'll save you!

Let us pray: O Lord, you know the deserts and the parched places in our lives. We seek your healing power. Lead on this Advent journey to our home with you, and to the place of our redemption; for we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Susanna Spencer, "12 Secular Christmas Songs that are Actually About Advent," at www.churchpop.com.

²David Marine, "The Story of I'll Be Home for Christmas and the Battleship North Carolina," at www.blog.coldwellbanker.com.

³Susan Stafford Kelly, "Christmas Aboard the USS *North Carolina*," at www.ourstate.com.