Christmas Eve 1989
HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Christmas is the only holiday among all the holidays when individuals want to be home. As a result, this past Friday and Saturday, there were more travelers by air, by bus, by auto, and by train than at any other time in the year. As if we already didn't know, I came across a survey which found that Christmas is the one time of the year when most people want to be home. It leads birthdays by three to one, and the 4th of July by almost five to one. But where is home? Is it where you were born or where you grew up? Is it where your parents are? Or grandparents? And what is it about Christmas that makes us all want to be home?

Someone pointed out that it's a bit ironic that the holiday we most want to spend at home is centered around a mother and father who had a baby away from home.

But there's another side to the story. Recently, I was reading an article written by Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a Middle-Eastern expert who is in residence at the Ecumenical Center for Biblical Studies in Tantur, only a few miles away from modern-day Bethlehem. In this article, Dr. Bailey casts new light on the Christmas story, as recorded by Luke in the New Testament of the Bible.

According to Dr. Bailey, Luke 2:7, which says there was "no room in the inn," uses the Greek word that Bible translators call "inn," but which would be better translated as "guest room." It does not imply a commercial establishment like a hotel. The Greek language has another word for that, and Luke does not use it.

What we Westerners need to understand, said Dr. Bailey, is the arrangement of a typical Middle-Eastern house. In such a house, the living room often doubles as a guest room. If there are overnight visitors, they sleep in this room. Adjacent to this room, but at a slightly lower level, as in a split-level house, is a rough outer room into which the family's animals are usually brought at night, especially in cooler weather. In the morning, they are led away, and the room is cleaned. Another feature of the Middle-Eastern home is that the manger or feed box for the animals is built into the floor of the upper level so that the animals can reach it but cannot walk in it.

A Middle-Easterner reading the Christmas story in Luke would immediately understand it this way: "Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, where there would have been many relatives." We are told by Luke that this was Joseph's hometown, the place where he grew up. Thus, we can assume he had many kinsfolk there. It would have been unthinkable for them to stay in a public inn. Instead, they sought out the home of relatives. But there were other relatives there as well, so there was no room in the guest room, and they had to sleep in the lower, outer room — the one into which animals were often brought at night. When Jesus was born, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths, also a Middle-Eastern tradition, and laid in the manger so that all the folks in the living room of the house could admire him too.

So, according to Dr. Kenneth Bailey, Jesus was not born into the cold, forbidding atmosphere usually depicted by our Western understanding of the text, but among extended family members gathered in Bethlehem for the same reason that Joseph and Mary were there.

If Dr. Bailey is correct, then the Savior of the world was born in the midst of a loving family, among aunts, uncles, and cousins known to his parents and loved by them. In other words, Jesus himself came home at Christmas.

However, I want to suggest to you that being “home for Christmas” has some deeper meanings as well.

Being home for Christmas, where we are in the midst of a loving, caring community, has something to do with a deeper sense of wanting to be at home — a sense of cosmic belonging, as if, at this special time of year, we come closer to eternity, closer to a sense of being connected to God, than at any other time. It’s something that’s difficult to put into the right words, but it’s something we feel very deeply. It’s another kind of being at home. That’s why so many people feel the need to attend church on Christmas. It’s coming home.

I believe it has something to do with another deep and opposite feeling we all have from time to time — a sense of “homelessness.” Haven’t you felt within yourself every now and then a longing, a yearning for something more, for something beyond, for a life you suspect is there but cannot touch? St. Augustine put it this way: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

It is this feeling of homelessness that haunts the works of our greatest writers, musicians, and artists. They know that humanity is not the measure of everything, that there is a mystery beyond us impinging on our lives, but never satisfying us in this life. It lures us, draws us, teases and torments us until at last we give up the ghost and embrace it fully.

We get glimpses of truly “being at home” when we find someone with whom we can be at home, who can be at one with us, and through whom we may find at-oneness with all.

There is a sense in which all our life is an effort to overcome our feeling of separation and to find each other in fulfilling relationships and to be in relationship with God.

The Christmas event is the story of God’s having come among us, of our having heard from home. In the baby born at Bethlehem, God has touched our lives and this world in a new way. In Christmas, God is saying, “Here is my gift of love. You have your ultimate home with me.” Jesus himself would say later, “In God’s house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you.”

Each year at Christmas, the newspapers usually have one or more stories about someone coming home after having been gone for a time. Here’s one of them: A woman in Houston named Beverly Elliott had not seen her son Russell for four years, and had not heard from him in two years, but she knew he was homeless somewhere in Los Angeles County. She talked to the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department. Then she put a personal ad in the Los Angeles Times for 12 days in October. The ad said, “Russell L. from Houston, or anyone knowing where he lives, please call his mother collect (713-447-5968). Russell, your mother will never forget you. She loves you.” Maybe someone would see the ad and get in touch with her. Someone did.

A man named Ralph Campbell, who had spent 25 years living on the street, had given some extra sandwiches to a friend. The friend had turned to another friend and said, “Russ, do you want a sandwich?” Campbell phoned the newspaper. He led a reporter to some shipping

containers in a parking lot on Western Avenue. There were some bedrolls there. He thought this might be where Russell L. was sleeping.

The next morning, the reporter returned. A young man was asleep, rolled up in a bright yellow blanket. When he finally awoke, the reporter asked if he was Russell L. He said he was. “Your mother wants you to call her,” said the reporter. He gave Russell the ad.

Russell called home. His mother told him how much she missed him. They talked three times in the next several days. She said she would send him some tickets so he could fly home for Christmas. And go home he did.

At Christmas, we can all be at home — at home with God. God has reached out to us and said, “I love you, and I’m looking forward to your being at home.” We know that whatever happens to us in this world, we have a home with God forever. Come home to God this Christmas and let God be at home in you. Amen.