CHRISTMAS EVE 2001
HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Among all the holidays we celebrate, Christmas is the one when people most want to be home. As a result, this past weekend, there were more travelers by air, automobile, train, and bus than at any other time of year.

Home for Christmas! But where is home? Is it where you were born? Is it where your parents now live? Is it where you grew up? Or is it where you now live as an adult? And what is it about Christmas that causes us to want to be home?

Tonight, I want to suggest to you that being "home for Christmas" is more than a geographical location. In the deepest sense, being home for Christmas means that you want to celebrate the holiday in the midst of a loving, caring community. This is connected to an even deeper sense of wanting to be at home with God, your Creator. To be home for Christmas implies an experience of cosmic belonging, knowing that you are connected with others and with God. The popular song heard so much at this time of year says: "I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams."

It's a longing that's difficult to put into exact words, but it's something you feel intensely. It's another kind of being at home. That's why so many people sense the need to attend church at Christmas. It's coming home.

It's also related to another and opposite feeling you have from time to time — a sense of homelessness or a feeling of being disconnected. Haven't you felt within yourself every now and then a longing, a yearning for something more, for something beyond, for a meaning in life which you suspect is available, but you cannot touch?

St. Augustine put it this way: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

It is this sense of homelessness that haunts the lives of some of our most sensitive writers, musicians, and artists. They know that humanity is not the measure of everything — that there is a mystery and power beyond us which impinges on our lives but never completely satisfies us in this life. It lures us, draws us, teases and torments us, until we 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 can find at-one-ness with all.

There is a sense in which all of our lives are an effort to overcome our feeling of separation, to find others in fulfilling relationships, and to be in relationship with God.

The Christmas event is the story of God taking the initiative, of God's dwelling among us, of our having heard from home. The story of the baby born in Bethlehem is a reminder that God touches our lives and enters our world in a way we can best understand and experience — in a human being. In the Christmas story, God is saying, "Here is my gift of love. You have your ultimate home with me." Jesus said it another way: "In God's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." We come from God, and we return to God.

Each year at Christmas, the newspapers and other media are filled with stories of individuals coming home, or finding a new understanding of “home” after having been away.

Here’s a story that I have told before. It is one of my favorites. The young man who wrote this story said that many of his memories of home as a child were not good ones, especially the Christmas memories. But now that his parents have died and he has grown up, he remembers a Christmas story his father told him, and because of that story, he has a new understanding of what it means to be “home” for Christmas, no matter where he is.

There was a little boy who was very poor. He and his brothers and sisters lived with their widowed mother, who was barely able to feed them all. He worked in a store every day after school and on weekends. All his clothes were patched and worn. He had only one toy — a little car. Even that one toy was broken. The roof was smashed in on one side, all but one of the windows were gone, and two of the wheels were missing.

The little boy loved that toy car very much. Since he had nothing else to play with, it became everything: a race car when he was a sportsman, a tank when he was a soldier, and an ambulance when he was a doctor. Almost every moment of happiness he remembered had to do with that car.

It was Christmas time. The family was so poor that there would be no presents, but the little boy was excited all the same. He had always wanted to go to midnight mass on Christmas Eve, and this year, for the first time, he would be allowed to stay up for it.

Everyone had told him how splendid it was. And before the mass itself began, there would be the blessing of the crèche. It was a very large crèche. There were plaster figures of Joseph and Mary, of the wise men, of the shepherds, of all kinds of animals, and of angels overhead. A plaster figure of the baby Jesus, with a halo still more glorious than Mary’s or Joseph’s, lay on real straw in the center of it all.

In this parish, it was the custom for everyone who came to midnight mass to bring a gift for the Christ child. Before taking their places in the pews, people would lay some offering in the crib. Some of these gifts were very expensive: silver chalices for the altar, new clothes for the poor, envelopes filled with money.

The little boy wanted very much to give the Christ child a present. But what could he give? He gave all the money from his after-school job to his mother. He had nothing else. He decided he would find another job and save enough money to buy a present for the baby Jesus, and he did that.

All through Advent, he got up before dawn and worked at another store until it was time to go to school. By the time Christmas Eve arrived, he had enough money to leave a good present at the crèche. He sat at the table in the kitchen in his small house, counting what he had earned.

While he was trying to decide whether he had time to buy a gift or should simply leave the money at the crèche, his mother returned home. “Oh, son,” she said, “What a good boy you are. Now we can have a real Christmas dinner.” She scooped up the money and hurried off to the store before it closed.

The little boy was heartbroken. He went to his room, trying not to be angry at his mother. He remembered what he had been taught to do whenever he was hurt or disappointed: “Offer it to Jesus.” On his dresser, he saw his broken toy car. He had not had much time to play with it for weeks, but it had been waiting for him. And then he realized what he had to offer to Jesus. Later in the evening, when he had combed his hair and dressed in his best clothes and was ready to go to mass, the car was in his pocket.

He was going alone because his mother had to stay with the younger children. When he arrived, the church was already filling up, and he was almost lost among the adults in their bulky coats. He felt very much alone, for almost everyone else seemed to be with family and friends. He walked up the aisle, genuflected as he had been taught, and turned to the crèche, which was set up before one of the side altars. The baby Jesus was in the manger. Gifts were piling up around him. Some were beautifully wrapped, perhaps toys for poor children whose mothers were not as fiercely proud as his. Some were unwrapped so that you could see how expensive they were. The little boy stood shyly before the crèche and laid his broken toy car amid all the treasures.

The organ had been playing the prelude. Soon the service would begin. The little boy squeezed into a pew close to the front so that he could see the priest bless the crèche. Almost everyone was in place, and an usher took a last look at the crèche to see that everything was ready. What the usher saw made him angry. “Who would leave a piece of trash like this at our Lord’s crib?” he said loudly enough for the little boy to hear, and he picked up the car and threw it across the church so that it came to rest at the far end of the transept. The little boy could see it lying on its roof, with its two wheels spinning, looking like a wreck indeed. But he could not retrieve it, for the procession had begun and everyone had stood up to sing the first hymn.

The little boy was crying, but he stood up too. The procession advanced down the aisle. The priests were in their finest vestments. But the procession came to a dead stop when it reached the crossing, and all the singing died away into awed silence. At first, the little boy could not tell what had happened, but he wiped away his tears and looked up to see what everyone else was staring at: the baby Jesus had come to life and was crawling across the cold stone floor of the church. He crawled until he reached the corner of the other transept, tucked the broken car under his arm, and crawled back to his crèche. By this time, all the people had fallen to their knees. At last, the priest rose and approached the manger. There, just as before, was the plaster child lying in the straw with a bright halo, but now he smiled like a happy child and his arms were folded tight around a broken toy car.

The young man who remembered this story, which had been told to him by his father years ago, said he didn’t realize until now that as he was growing up, he had cast his father into the wrong role. His father was not the good little boy who gave his last toy to the Lord. His father, who felt like a failure throughout his life, was the smashed car with a couple of wheels missing. This story reminded his dad that God loved him regardless.

Now the young man knew that even though he many times felt he didn’t get what he needed most from his family, this story was a more precious gift, which continued to remind him that God loved him even when he was broken.

When you know that, you are at home. You too can be at home this Christmas, wherever you are, because God loves you no matter how broken you might be. Amen.