



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

## *A Christmas Homecoming*

Jim Cochrane

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*Psalm 148; Luke 2:41-52*

One of the requirements for my eventual ordination is the completion of one unit of CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education. This past fall I completed that unit, working at a local hospital as a part-time chaplain while also engaging in classroom work to build pastoral care skills and dive into self-reflection. I was driving home from the hospital a couple of weeks ago after a one of my last chaplaincy shifts when I passed a small church on the side of the road. I had gotten to know this church in my own personal way, driving the same route home from the hospital every shift, winding down the country roads, and had gotten used to its often-witty signs as a funny, comforting presence after an otherwise heavy day, and I read it as I got close. This particular week the sign said, "This Christmas, Home is Where the Heart is."

Every big holiday has a close connection with home, but Christmas more than most. Listening to Nat King Cole's

Christmas album and the smell of freshly baked Christmas cookies tugs on one's heartstrings in a deep, nostalgic place.

I remember the first Christmas I ever spent away from home. It was my freshman year of college, and I was on the varsity swim team. Like many college teams we took an annual training trip to somewhere warm where we could stare at a different black line painted on the bottom of a pool for 4 hours a day. We left a few of days before Christmas bound for Honolulu, Hawaii, and returned a week and a half later, right before New Year's Eve. In addition to trading in the snowscapes for walks on the beach, it felt strange to be so far away from home on such an intimate holiday because I couldn't joke with my siblings about everything that had happened in college and around the house, and I would miss the Christmas Eve service right here at Westminster.

Still though, I found ways to tie it back to my family - I got to call them despite the six-hour time difference and spent the day honoring them doing something that only a Cochrane would do on a holiday vacation: an ungodly amount of physical exertion by finding the tallest peak around and climbing it. I also spent the evening hanging

out with my teammates, going on walks, playing football on the beach, and watching the sun set over the Pacific.

Spending the holiday with my teammates ensured it was not a bad way to spend Christmas by any means, just different. The memories of that tropical Christmas flashed through my mind as I drove home from the hospital that evening, but then my mind settled on the hundreds of patients I left behind that night. Some of them would get out of the hospital in time to be with family, but others would be confined to one, solitary room with a four-digit name. Others still would not live long enough to ring in Christmas Day.

Across the world we see Blue Christmas manifest. Families are separated from one another, empty chairs at Christmas dinner tables serve as informal memorials for those who are no longer with us. Their memories remain and their spirits linger, but they will not open any presents this year. How can one celebrate Christmas so far from home?

I can't stop thinking about Mary and Joseph in the passage for this morning. Now, my wife and I do not yet have a child of our own, so I can only imagine the absolute panic

and dread Mary and Joseph must have felt as they raced back to Jerusalem. This child, the Son of God, had still been left alone, unattended! Where would he eat? Where would he sleep? And even after hightailing it all the way back to Jerusalem, it still took days to find him! They finally track him down and find him sitting with the teachers of the temple, listening, and asking questions. The homecoming is not what you might expect, though. Unlike in Home Alone where mother and son are reunited with a huge hug as the music swells, this story turns to scolding.

“Why have you done this to us?” Mary asks. “Joseph and I have been worried sick about you!” But Jesus responds – the first words Jesus speaks in Luke’s gospel – equally as harshly. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Now it wouldn’t be a proper seminarian sermon if I didn’t dive into the original Greek of the passage just briefly, so bear with me. The original question of Jesus was asking, Did you not know that I must be ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου, or literally, “in the things/affairs of my father.” I have no doubt that over the years, scholars wrestled with how best to translate this all-important question, the first words

spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, into modern language, dancing that delicate line between honesty to the words as written and honesty to the intention of the author.

By settling on this translation of Jesus being “in [his] Father’s house” translators highlighted a great tension within the story about Jesus’ lineage. Is he the son of Joseph, as Mary says? Or is he the son of God, as Jesus himself proclaims? This is an important question not only for the future of theology and Christology, or the study of Christ, but also a practical issue in the ancient world. Hebrew tradition spoke of the bayit ‘av, or “house of the father,” that dictated where your home was. The house from which you descended -- your bayit ‘av -- consisted of your parents, siblings, and relatives. They were everyone who you relied on in your vulnerable times, and who relied on you when they themselves were weak. This is the system that Jesus refutes in the passage, correcting his mother.

I imagine Jesus walking out into the massive courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple with Mary walking alongside, talking. Reaching the open space, seeing hundreds of people from all backgrounds come together in worship

and commerce, he gestures to everything around him.  
“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?  
Do you not see that this is the home to which I belong?”

See, the Temple of Jerusalem in those days was not just the epicenter of the Jewish faith in this era – it was so much more than that. People travelled from all over the ancient world to worship together, pray together, and conduct business with one another. Under the eye of Herod I, the Temple had been rebuilt completely, expanded and refurbished from the ground up. The work was completed only 25 or 30 years before this story, so the Temple to those original hearers of the Gospels conjured images of an ancient melting pot: a space rich with different smells, languages, and customs. A place where Jews and Gentiles could be together. This was the house of God that Jesus referred to: this was the “home” where Jesus assumed Mary and Joseph would look for him.

This year I was invited to an event called  
“FriendsgivingHanaMas,” a portmanteau celebration of Hanukkah, Christmas, and the millennial trend of “Friendsgiving.” This trend has come about as millennials seek to find an expanded understanding of home. Whether unable to return home because of distance,

inability to reconcile with family, or a myriad of other reasons, young people set aside time to celebrate the holidays with their friends who know them, support them, and love them. Friendsgiving even feels like big family gatherings: the division between the “football watchers” and “non-football watchers,” trying to disguise the store-bought potato salad as your secret family recipe, and the laughter of reminiscing on shared memories. While not inherently religious events, the Spirit moves through these celebrations. The joy of knowing others care about you. The love that fills the air. The invitation to community.

So often in hearing the word “home,” we draw Norman Rockwell-esque paintings in our heads: a turkey on the table, Christmas carols in the air. But the divine sense of home is something different entirely. It is a place where every person has been invited to be together. A place where justice, mercy, and kindness are the items on the holy dinner menu.

In her book, *By Little and By Little*, social activist and founder of the Catholic Worker movement Dorothy Day writes about Christ’s challenge to his followers for radical hospitality. She writes that it is our duty to welcome in the

stranger, to visit those in prison, and to provide for those without. She writes of the practice of the “stranger’s room” in the early Christian church in which every house had a spare room ready for any stranger who might have need for it. Christians did this not because they saw in the stranger some recognition of another loved one, or because they saw reflections of Christ in them, but because Christ was them.

The Catholic Worker movement that Dorothy Day started has sought to continue that exact work. Founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, it is a legacy that provide justice and mercy to anyone who needs it. Most known for their houses of hospitality, the Catholic Worker is led by volunteers who provide food and hospitality to anyone and everyone, no questions asked. For those without homes, family, or friends, the Catholic Worker has been a beacon of hope. Strangers filled small living rooms in run-down parts of towns all for the promise of food on the table and love in the air. It doesn’t matter that you don’t know the name of the person sitting across from you reading the paper, because they are family and you are both home.

The world this morning grieves the passing of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, champion of human rights in oppressive apartheid South Africa, and divine home-maker. He often spoke of the Zulu proverb of ubuntu, or the idea that “I am because we are.” To have ubuntu is to be hospitable, generous, friendly, caring, and compassionate.

Archbishop Tutu wrote, “A person with ubuntu knows that they belong in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed or treated as if they were less than who they are.” Ubuntu, being caught up in another’s humanity, is welcoming others home.

This Christmas and every Christmas, we receive a baby boy, fully human and fully divine, and proclaim him the savior of the world. In him is life, and an invitation. The divine power of God born into human flesh is an invitation to us all to take up the challenge of Christ’s work in the world. It’s an invitation to provide a sense of home to all people by providing works of mercy and of justice. It’s about feeding people while keeping in mind the pain of hunger. It’s about offering lodging while keeping in mind the sharp sting of winter winds. It’s about celebrating the birth of Christ on Christmas while

keeping in mind the fact that a stable had to suffice because there was no room at the inn.

Christmas has looked different these past two years. Like many families, the Cochranes are not having a big celebration this year in the interest of everyone's safety, and our drive to Minneapolis concluded with a nasal swab COVID test instead of hugs. How can we celebrate Christmas when we are so far from home? It's in times like this when we must reevaluate the premise of that question. This year we have an invitation to expand our definition of home. Home is more than Christmas cookies and a big meal with family. This year we remember that home is about showing care and providing support for those around us who need it most. This year, home takes the form of getting a vaccine booster to ensure the safety of those who cannot. This year home takes the form of social distancing so that those who are most susceptible to the pandemic are around for next Christmas.

The concept of "home" is a strange thing - it means something different to every person, and its image to any one person can change over time. For some it paints an image of family gathered from all over, for others it is a close-knit group of friends with whom you can truly feel

like yourself, and for others yet it might be random strangers brought together by the promise of community and shared humanity. Regardless of what it looks like or how many are gathered, that is the household of God, a feast to which we all have an invitation.

Thanks be to God.