

It is Christmas Eve at last, a night on which memories are made. A night so full of memories that it's hard to keep your head clear, so full are they of nostalgia and expectation. There is magic and wonder in the air, even for us who are well past magic and wonder.

What is it about Christmas that can fill our hearts again with wonder and childlike expectation, we who are too old for such things, and yet feel it nonetheless?

It's not the buildup, really. Not all the commercials on television promoting the latest high tech gadget or the hottest new toy that start appearing, so it seems, just after Labor Day.

It's not all the folks crowded into the malls so dense you can hardly walk down the wide aisles without bumping into someone. And it's definitely not the mad rush for parking places, the circling, circling, circling of the lot only to get aced out by the one car that pulls in ahead of you when the guy backing out blocks your way in.

None of those things evokes Christmas for us. It's more the *traditional* things that do it. The houses festooned with lights. Carols sung in church. Putting up the tree and hanging the ornaments, each one a memory in itself.

I suppose what evokes Christmas most in our memories is the idea of *going home*, going back to some special place in our mind and heart where Christmas is centered. A place in our lives with dimensions and walls furnished in a specific way and inhabited with particular people. It's a place where we *belong*, which is to say that it belongs to *us*, where we feel safe and good.

Wherever home is on Christmas Eve, that place where we go in our heart, it is a place of hope and expectation where we seek to find the home again that lives inside of each of us in spite of the disappointments and heartbreaks we have known.

Tonight we know *precisely* where that home is, don't we? Our home is in a manger far away from here, where a long time ago a worried father, a just and righteous man who wished to do the right thing by his betrothed, made his way, along with his

expectant bride, into the city of David which is called Bethlehem. There in the lowliness of a stable amid the wondering eyes of some sheep and perhaps a donkey, a child was born. The mother, barely more than a child herself, wrapped him in bands of cloth, this boy, her firstborn, and laid him in a feeding trough, a manger, nestling him in the hay.

And as she lays him down for the rest he will need to grow strong and brave, we find our rest as well. For there in that place which is our spiritual home “the hopes and fears of all the years” are met in [him] tonight.

Earlier this fall, on Veterans’ Day, we marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cease-fire that marked the end of what we now know was *not* the “war to end all wars.” There is a Christmas story, perhaps one you have heard, that emanates from what then was called “The Great War,” the war we know as “World War I.” It’s the story of a Christmas truce that was called on Christmas Eve, 1914, the first year of that great and terrible war. German and British forces were facing each other on the battlefield, each in their muddy trenches, separated by a strip of flat, ugly land intersected with barbed wire. Suddenly, the British soldiers were amazed to see lights coming on, along the line of the enemy trenches. Then came the unbelievable sound of singing — German soldiers raising their voices to the familiar verses of “Silent Night” sung, of course, in German, ending the German for “...sleep in heavenly peace.” When the sound died away, the British soldiers replied with “The First Noel.” Back and forth, the singing went on for about an hour.

Then there were voices of invitation to cross over to enemy lines. One German with great courage started walking across the “no man’s land” that separated the two trenches, and was soon followed by some of his buddies, all with their hands in their pockets to show that they had no weapons. When they’d crossed over to the enemy trench, one German soldier said, “I’m a Saxon, you are Anglo-Saxons. Why do we fight?” The soldiers on both sides started to talk together and decided to declare peace for one day, beginning in the morning, Christmas morning.

As Christmas Day passed, without the usual noise of gunfire and mortar blasts, even the wild birds returned, and the soldiers fed them. For that one moment, in the midst of a brutal and ugly war, men who, a day later would again be enemies, were simply...at home with one another.

That is the place where we long to go, to the place of peace that sets aside all human hostility and inhumanity and returns us to the center of all our hearts. That place where we may run with shepherds and kneel with kings and lay down the burdens of our lives with all the treasures we have brought him, with no treasure being more valuable to him than simply the treasure that we are, just the way we are; don't change a thing. For he welcomes us "as is," and all the rest he makes right — he makes whole — simply by our being there, by worshipping him, by being so close to the One in the manger.

At last we know why we have come tonight, because it wouldn't be Christmas without being here. We needed to come home, to be with our family, the people of God, poor broken lot that we are, to be with Mom and Dad, with our children and grandchildren, with our brothers and sisters, with the tax collectors and prostitutes, the Pharisees and hypocrites, the scientifically skeptical and the adamantly agnostic, the German soldier and the British soldier, the bored, and the baptized. God's own.

This is that place where we have longed to be. That place of reunion and peace and joy, where the glow of human love meets the warmth of heavenly compassion.

*"O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.*

*Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.*

*We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell,*

*A come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!"*

Amen.