

# **COME HOME TO STAY**

**Luke 2:1-20**  
**Luke 15:11-24**

*Christmas doesn't have to end.*

A sermon preached by  
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The holiday season is busy in many ways, but it is an especially busy time for travel. The highways are jammed; the airports are full; even buses and trains are packed at Christmastime. So many people want to travel to be with family or to go home. Some of you probably travelled to get here today. AAA estimated recently that over 115 million people will be travelling over the Christmas holidays this year, a record number since they began keeping records 20 years ago. They also estimate that they will answer 853,000 calls for assistance with dead batteries and flat tires and such this holiday.<sup>1</sup> It seems like everyone is on the road to somewhere.

It wasn't much different the first Christmas when Jesus was born. According to Luke, the Roman tax census had forced many people to travel. There was no room in the inn, right? Mary and Joseph had a very long and arduous journey to make from Nazareth of Galilee to Bethlehem of Judea. As the crow flies, it is only about 80 miles. But when you consider that they probably made the journey on foot (or if they were lucky, on a donkey), and that Mary was nine months pregnant, about to have the baby at any moment, it was a tough trip to make.

The shepherds had a journey to make when they heard the angelic announcement of the birth of a Savior in Bethlehem. They ran from their hillside post outside of town down into the village to try to find this newborn King.

Some time after Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph received some very important guests. They were kings/priests/astrologers from the East, probably from the neighborhood of modern-day Iraq. They had come a long way because they had seen this star in the east (actually, it would have been in the west to them) and had followed it to the place where Jesus was. They won the "Who Came Farthest" contest by a long shot. Just about everybody connected with the story of Christ's birth was on a journey of some sort.

I want to invite you to take a journey today, and while it is not very far, it may be the most surprising and difficult trip you've ever taken.

The journey I want to talk about today is less than two feet long, but it could take you from one world to another. I'm talking about the odyssey from the head to the heart.

We are here today because we are aware to some extent of what the Christmas story is all about. We know in our head that we are celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. But I believe what God wants to happen today is for Jesus Christ to be born in the hearts of everyone who worships in this place. It may be for the very first time, or it may be the hundredth time. You may have talked to Jesus this morning, or it may have been twenty years since you felt the real presence of God in your life. It doesn't matter. God has a great blessing for you, a life to be lived on a whole new level if you will take the journey today from your head to your heart.

When the baby Jesus grew up and began to teach, he told a story about a young man who had to go far away before he could make the short trip from head to heart. He asked his father one day to pay him in advance his share of the inheritance, so he could go off and make his way in the world. It was a highly unusual request, but his father agreed, and the young man went to a far country and wasted his inheritance on meaningless living—wine, women, song, that sort of thing. When his money ran out, so did his friends, and because the far country was experiencing a famine, the only job he could find was feeding pigs. Nothing could have been more distasteful than that, until the day the young man realized he was so hungry that the pig slop was looking good to him. Suddenly he came to his senses, and he realized that even the servants in his father's house were fed and clothed well. He could go home and fling himself on his father's mercy and beg to be taken on as a servant, and at least he would eat kosher.

As he approached his boyhood home, the young man was surprised to see his old dad running—he had never seen his dad run—down the road to meet him. He had evidently been watching for him all these years. He embraced him with tears in his eyes, and when the son began his well-prepared speech about not being worthy to be called a son and

coming to work as a servant, his father hushed him and said to the real servants, “Bring him some clothes and shoes and get the feast ready. We’re going to celebrate, because this son of mine was dead and is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!”

We know this story as the parable of the Prodigal Son, and it’s an ancient tale. But it is a story that continues to be played out in our world every day:

- Whenever a teenager leaves home in anger against his parents
- Whenever a parent neglects a child for the pursuit of pleasure or wealth
- Whenever a person falls victim to any kind of substance addiction
- Whenever a husband or wife is unfaithful to the vows of marriage
- Whenever a self-righteous and legalistic religion closes the heart of compassion in a person of faith
- Whenever the pains and griefs of life embitter a person against God
- Whenever there is a moment of self-awareness, a realization that we are far from home, and a desire to return.

There are many prodigals among us today. In fact, most of us have a little prodigal in us. We all have a heavenly Father who is waiting for us. The invitation of the waiting Father to each one of us is the same: “Come home. Come home to stay.” When we realize how much better things are in our Father’s house and we do come back, his word is always “Welcome home.”

When I was a kid, I thought “prodigal” meant “runaway” or “wandering.” I was surprised to find that the dictionary actually defines prodigal as “recklessly extravagant.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the son is recklessly extravagant in the way he spends his inheritance. He is prodigal. But so is the father. He is recklessly extravagant in the way he loves his son. He waits for him; he watches for him; he never gives up. When he sees his son at a distance walking back toward the house, he forgets any appearance of decency or dignity, and he runs to him in tears and hugs his dirty neck and calls for the celebration to begin. He is the

prodigal father, recklessly extravagant with his love, his mercy, and his grace.

I have been incredibly blessed along my journey, but there have been times when I felt far from home. Five years ago this Christmas, I had recently been through a divorce. I was living in Fort Smith, but I was not pastor of this church yet. I was a superintendent of the United Methodist churches in a 17-county area. December is a lonely time for superintendents. The pastors and churches are all busy with Advent and Christmas; nobody wants to see the superintendent around. And you don't get to preach any Christmas Eve services unless someone gets sick unexpectedly—and sometimes not even then.

Fortunately, I have a dear friend who was pastor at Russellville at the time, and I went to Christmas Eve service with him and his wife. I even went to a Christmas party after church, even though I only knew three people there. Late that night I drove back to Fort Smith, and the next morning I did something I had never done before. I woke up on Christmas morning, and I was the only person in the house. It was weird and lonely and sad.

I didn't have any presents to myself to open, so I just pulled out my Bible and devotional books, and I read and prayed. One of my prayers was, "Lord, could you bring someone into my life, and give me the sense to recognize it when you do?"

Two weeks later, on the day of Epiphany (Isn't that ironic?), I met someone in a church meeting. She was single; she was smart; she was funny; she was pretty; and she was a Methodist! I recognized my good fortune, and my life started getting better and better. Six months later, I became pastor of this church, and thirteen months later, Carey and I got married. And I felt like I had come home again.

That was an extravagant gift. I did not deserve it. But it was a gift of love that changed my life. When God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, that was extravagant—prodigal even—but it was a gift of love that changed the world. We didn't deserve it. But God so recklessly and extravagantly loved the world that he gave his only Son—born in

Bethlehem, laid in a manger in a stable, whose birth we celebrate over 2,000 years later. Why? So that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have everlasting life. So we could come home. So we could join the party. So we could make the journey from our head to our heart and stay at home forever.

In that Christmas Eve service five years ago, my friend Roy Smith said something profound in his sermon. He said that everyone in the Christmas story was displaced, but nobody was lost. Nobody was on their home turf, but everybody was on a journey that had been initiated by God.

I felt displaced that night. We all get displaced sometimes by the events of life. But we are not lost. Joseph and Mary had been on a long journey, but they were not lost. They knew exactly what God was doing. The shepherds who had come in from the fields walked out of the stable glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. The Wise Men left Bethlehem by another way, because they had been changed by being in the presence of the baby Messiah.

You may feel displaced for whatever reason today. But you don't have to feel lost. You have a Father who waits for you. There is a way to come home.

You will leave this church today, but you don't have to let Christmas end. This warm and wonderful assurance of the reality of God's presence in the baby Jesus does not have to be like some Christmas sale that will be over before the kids go back to school. God's love, God's grace, God's mercy never end. Our lives in Christ will never end. The key to this kind of life is to make the journey from your head to your heart. Make this good news *your* good news. Today, come home, and you will never have to leave. You can come home to stay.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newsroom.aaa.com/category/travel/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MS: 1973), p. 918.