

“Home in a Shoebox”

John 14:1-6

Series: Home for Christmas

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2020

For me Christmas Eve is just like an Olympic marathon. Every year on December 24th I kiss my family goodbye at 12 noon and don't see them again until well after 12 midnight. During this night, I race back and forth between the sanctuary and the Vineyard preaching at up to seven worship services. By the end, my voice is more hoarse than Mr. Ed's as I stumble through my front door, wave hi to Santa, and head for bed.

But not this year. For the first time in 35 years, I will spend Christmas Eve on the couch watching myself. Thanks to the Coronavirus I will be Home for Christmas! Now please don't think I am slacking off. There's still a lot to do. I need to post on the chimney Santa cannot enter my house without masks, handwashing and social distancing. I must make sure the Wise men bring to the Christ Child N95 masks, Hand Sanitizer and Toilet Paper. The angels better mask up when singing to the shepherds so they don't cause a super spreader event. And now at last we know the true story of why there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the Inn: “Hotel Closed by Covid Government Shutdown.”

Nearly all of us will be home for Christmas this year. And that's not so bad. After all “home” is one of the most beautiful words in the English language. Culinary masterpieces at the finest restaurants can't match Mom's home cooking. Galleries of artwork can't compare with the comfort of your family room. A suite in the finest hotel is no substitute for your own soft bed. That's because home is more than four walls, a roof, and a mailbox. Home is the voices, faces and embraces of your loved ones. Little Brady was born to Nick and Kari Morales 16 weeks early on June 17 at less than 2 pounds. I'm pleased to say he is home for Christmas and doing miraculously well. His t-shirt says it all: Home is where Mom and Dad are. Special relationships make a house a home.

Yet Covid is causing a variety of feelings about being home. Some of you are happy to be hunkered in your quarantine bunker. Others fear cabin fever more than Covid fever. And for some of you, home is not a safe place. Within the privacy of your four walls, there may be forces loosening the fabric of your family. You are all on top of each other 24/7. Home is also office and classroom. Just the everyday duties of holding down a job, going to school, raising children, getting along as a family and keeping love alive in your marriage can strain and break the ties that bind. Anxiety, addictions, affairs, abuse poison your relationships. Caring for a loved one with a physical or mental illness is frustrating and exhausting. Being home for Christmas may mean you can't celebrate with loved ones at their home and they can't come to yours. And maybe there is someone you hold dear that you can't hold this Christmas because Covid has claimed them.

The first Christmas was all about home – both the joys and the sorrows. Joseph is troubled because his fiancé Mary is pregnant and it's not his. Then

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:20

Mary and Joseph must leave their home and travel to Bethlehem for the census. When they arrive, there is no home where Mary can safely give birth. The shepherds are essentially homeless – living out in the fields – when the angel announces the Messiah’s birth. The Magi leave their home - probably in Persia - and travel for two years just to worship the King of the Jews. And when they leave, Joseph, Mary and Jesus are forced to flee their new home and become refugees in Egypt to avoid Herod’s soldiers.

Yet the One who travels from home the farthest by far is Jesus. The Son of God left the safety of His heavenly home and descended to be born a helpless, homeless baby here on earth. At the age of thirty He was run out of his hometown Nazareth and spent the last three years of life without a place to call home. Why did Jesus give up His home? So we can have a home. So we can be at home with Him in this life and be in His home in the next life. On the night before His crucifixion Jesus said to His disciples,

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6).

Jesus overcomes three barriers which prevent us from finding our way home. They are the same three obstacles which trouble our hearts in this era of Covid.

The first obstacle is **Distance**. Jesus is the Way to cross the distance between us and God. Since March we’ve all become good at social distancing. I feel like I have a force field around me. The minute I walk down the grocery aisle people in every direction immediately back off and give me space. Before Covid I would have thought it was because I forgot to wear deodorant. That might still be the reason.

Yet social distancing creates social isolation. Now more than ever we need to hang out, to hug, to hold each other. But we can’t. If being distant from each other is painful, think of how devastating it is to be distant from God. So many people feel far from God. How do you cross the distance to God? The world’s religions try to answer this question. They offer rules and rituals so you can make yourself acceptable to God, so you can travel the distance to whatever afterlife they offer. There is even a website called Heaven’s Registry. For \$20 you receive “100% guaranteed admission into heaven. For only \$15 more you take a cherished pet with you.”¹

¹ Andrea Sands, Edmonton Sun (12-30-04).

Jesus doesn't give directions. He doesn't say, "This is the way." He says, "I am the Way." We cannot cross the distance over the chasm between earth and heaven. You can't get there from here on your own power. Religious directions won't do it. We need someone to enter into our world and be with us – to be the Way.

Seven years ago Steve Daniel was found to have Alzheimer's. His wife Mary moved him to a nearby care facility in Jacksonville, Florida so she could visit him every day. When Covid struck in March the facility forbid outside visitors. Mary was "desperate" to find a way to stay connected. She said,

We have separated these folks to save them, but the isolation will absolutely kill them. Dementia patients need interaction. They need to be touched so that they can grow instead of just wither away.

After 114 days of separation, Mary found a way. The Care facility called and said, "We have a part-time job available as a dishwasher. That will allow you to enter the facility and see Steve. Will you take it?" She would take any job they offered. Mary says Steve now feels love—something he deeply missed when they were separated.² Jesus doesn't give us rules and rituals. He comes into our world to give us a relationship, to be with us, to love us. You can cross the distance to God when Jesus' Cross is your Way.

The second obstacle is **Division**. Jesus is the Truth that unites us with God. This has been a very divisive year: Red States and Blue States, Blacks Lives and Blue Lives, masks and no masks. Division is really not new. We humans can divide over anything. Healthy, respectful discussion is essential. Yet when anger gets out of control we all lose. Raymond Novaco, a psychology professor at UC Irvine says, "We're living in a big anger incubator." 51-year-old Marvin Smith Jr. was so angry he hadn't received his COVID-19 stimulus check, he started arguing with his mother. In his rage he set his mom's shed on fire.³ When division rules, we wind up burning down our home. Why are we so divisive? We each think we know the truth and the other side is lying.

Jesus taught a lot of truths but He really came to be the Truth that unites divided people and reconciles all of us to God. The Bible says,

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5: 19, 21

Why is Jesus the Truth? On Christmas, the Eternal God also became completely human. Because He is the only one who has a foot in both worlds, He can reconcile us to God. Jesus proves He is the Truth by rising from the dead. God entered one cave to become human and leaves another cave so humans can come to God. By His death and resurrection, Jesus removes division and reunites us with our Heavenly Father.

² Caitlin O'Kane, "Woman gets job as dishwasher at senior care facility so she can see her husband with Alzheimer's," CBS News (7-10-20)

³ Amanda Woods, "Louisiana man angry over stimulus check set mom's shed on fire," New York Post (4-22-20)

John Ortberg tells a story about his friend Jimmy and his son Davey who were in the ocean in Mexico when a rogue riptide swept them out to the sea. Though Jimmy is an Olympic athlete he was powerless to save his son or himself. In a few minutes both would drown. He tried to scream, but his family couldn't hear him. He thought: My wife and my daughters are going to have a double funeral.

Meanwhile, his cousin saw what was happening and knew if you fight a riptide, you will die. He ran to where there was a sandbar, stood as close as he could get to Jimmy and Davey, and lifted his hand up saying, "You come to me. You come to me." They did and Jimmy and Davey were saved. If you try to go the way your gut tells you to go—the short cut to shore—you will die. If you live by your own truth, you will die. God says, "If you come to me, you will live." Jesus is the Truth that unites us with God.⁴

The third obstacle is **Disease**. Jesus is the Life who saves us for God. This December we've heard the worst news and the best news. The surge in coronavirus cases is making nearly every day in December one of the deadliest days in American history surpassing 9-11. At the same time, highly effective Covid vaccines just received FDA approval. Millions are lining up to be inoculated while others hesitantly hold back. We all agree this worldwide physical disease is a matter of life and death.

Yet there is a spiritual disease which is a worldwide pandemic and claims 100% of human lives. It destroys relationships, poisons the planet and drives us to war. Most of all, this disease eternally separates us from God. It's called sin – the dis-ease of the soul. That's the worst news. The best news, the Good News, is there's a cure that is 100% effective in stopping sin and saving our lives eternally. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah told us it was coming.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
Isaiah 53:5

Jesus is the cure for the disease of sin. But you have to receive the vaccine. You have to place your life in His hands. Then you will be at home with Him in this life. You will receive His peace. Our Covid troubles will not disappear when we turn over the calendar on January 1, 2021. We need the peace only Jesus can give. Join us at Woodside starting January 3 when we begin a special series called "The Missing Peace." Discover how to have peace with God, with yourself, in your family, at work and school and even peace with your enemies. You can also sign up for a Peace Pod – a group of four people who help each other receive and practice Jesus' peace. Anyone can join a Peace Pod, even if you don't live near Woodside since many will be online. Sign up on the link next to this video and we'll contact you. Start feeling at home with Jesus in this life.

Christmas means you can also go to His Home in the next life. Jesus promises,

⁴ John Ortberg, in the sermon The Way of Wisdom, PreachingToday.com

I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. John 14:2-3.

Home comes to us in a baby in a manger who came to our home so He could one day take us to His Home.

Home came to little girl in a shoebox one Christmas. When Livia was 2 years old, her mother could no longer care for her. She brought her to the doors of an orphanage in Galati, Romania, and left her there. I cannot imagine what it felt like to be rejected by your mother as a toddler. For the next ten years, Livia grew up in the orphanage. Food was scarce and the filth was appalling.

Some days our food supply was so low all we had was a piece of bread that was hard as a rock and moldy. We also wore the same clothes for a week. We had only one toothbrush which we shared with hundreds of other children.

Livia didn't dream of a home, a family, an education or even a Barbie doll. She longed to feel someone's love and warm embrace...and hair clips. Then, at the age of 12, a shoebox changed her life forever. Livia received an Operation Christmas Child Shoebox like the hundreds of boxes you packed full of hygiene items, school supplies and toys.

Before we opened our boxes, a woman named Connie shared how they were packed by people who loved us. I was so mesmerized by the word "love." And then, they shared "the greatest news of all." That there's a God who gave His one and only Son who died on the cross for me because He loves me. It sparked so much love, joy and hope in my life.

When the children opened their shoeboxes, the orphanage exploded into laughter. The air was filled with scents of toothpaste, soap and candy which were normally not allowed. When Livia opened her shoebox there on top were some hairclips. Connie helped her put them in her hair. For the very first time in her life she felt real love. Inside the box was a heart friendship bracelet. Livia wore one half of the bracelet and gave the other to Connie. When Livia accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, she said,

I wish I had a mega-sized microphone to tell the whole world I had Jesus in my heart. Two years later when I was 14, Connie came back to Romania and arranged for her to be adopted by a brand-new family.⁵

Today, Livia Satterfield Young shares with everyone that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. She has even returned to Romania to let children know they can have a home now and forever with Jesus. Tonight, if you want to be at home with Jesus now and have a home with Jesus forever I invite you to pray with me and commit or recommit your life to Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁵ Jessica Shirey, "Former Romanian Orphan Shares Operation Christmas Child Shoebox Story," Gant News (10-14-19)