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12/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Homecoming

## A God who shows up

by Emily Heitzman

**I just don't understand people who start playing Christmas music right after Halloween. I have friends who do, especially my former colleague who could not wait to get her hands on Mariah Carey's "Merry Christmas" album the minute she took her costume off.**

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not a cranky old Grinch. It's just that by early November, I have only started getting used to the weather change, and I try to take as many walks as possible to enjoy the beautiful colors of the leaves before they wither away. So don't start playing Christmas music, reminding me of the freezing wind and piles of snow that will soon take over the streets of Chicago. Come on, people!

Yet, right after Thanksgiving dinner, I usually turn on my Christmas Pandora station, and from then until New Years' Day, I am a Christmas music fanatic.

There are two songs I play over and over during Christmas: "There's no place like home for the holidays" and "I'll be home for Christmas."

Since I moved away after high school, I always look forward to going back to my parent's home for the holidays. And since Christmas songs, movies, and holiday TV specials often include themes of magical family "homecomings," I am guessing I'm not the only one whose focus in December is on getting ready to go home.

After all, doesn't Perry Como say: "If you want to be happy in a million ways, for the holidays, you can't

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beat home sweet home?"

### Home sweet home?

And yet, what about those individuals whose family relationships are broken or abusive, those who feel unsafe in their homes, or those who do not have homes to go to? Can they find places during the holidays that "beat home sweet home?"

It seems as though the theme lately in the news has been one of violence, instability, and displacement. The economy continues to leave many people jobless or underemployed, and more and more people are moving to transitional housing or experiencing homelessness. Natural disasters continue to displace families and devastate communities (particularly those that are underserved) for years, and many young people are being forced from their homes due to violence in their communities or households. In Chicago alone, 15,000 unaccompanied youth between the ages 12-24 are reported to be experiencing homelessness (3000 of whom openly identify as LGBTQIA+).

Additionally, while the global refugee crisis continues to be at an all-time high, the U.S. – which used to be a leader in welcoming those seeking refuge – has taken fewer and fewer refugees or asylum seekers. And in the last few years, we have heard about the numbers of deportations and families not only getting denied asylum at our border, but also being separated from their children and detained. We have seen horrific images of families making treacherous journeys on foot, asylum seekers being sprayed with tear gas, and children being locked up in cages.

So how can our cultural emphasis on "holiday homecoming" be good news when this "homecoming" is not a reality for so many?

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## Finding Christmas

While it is a wonderful privilege for many of us to go to a safe home for the holidays, this is not the only way one can find joy in Christmas. In fact, there was no magical “homecoming” involved during the first Christmas event 2,000 years ago.

For Mary and Joseph, things were chaotic and very unstable. Mary was an unwed pregnant teenager who was engaged to a poor carpenter from Nazareth. When Mary was close to the end of her pregnancy, she and Joseph had to travel by foot or donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census. Yet, while they were there, she went into labor and gave birth to her baby in a dirty, stinky stable that was possibly full of animals and manure because there was no room for her in the inn.

And just when you think things could not get any worse, not long after their son's birth, Joseph and Mary learned of King Herod's plan to kill their baby, so they picked up their newborn and escaped to Egypt.

This first Christmas was not a magical holiday homecoming story full of family turkey dinners, carol singing and football games. It did not involve decorating trees, baking cookies and opening wrapped gifts.

Rather, the first Christmas is a refugee story.

And it tells of a young, poor, homeless asylum seeking couple who fearfully flee their country and become residents in a foreign land in order to save their child's life.

And yet, this story is also a story of hope. It is in the midst of this violent and fearful event when God shows up in the flesh: not as a king who has worldly power, and not as one who is distant and does not understand the plight of the marginalized. Rather, God shows up as one of the marginalized. God shows up in the flesh in a dirty stable, as a vulnerable baby, to a terrified young homeless couple on the margins of society.

It is this God in the flesh—this Immanuel, “God with us”—who will come to bring good news to the poor, give release to the captives, bring sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free and who calls his followers to do the same.

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And it is this God—the one who personally understands us in our human suffering—who shows up in our most lonely and fearful moments, offering us hope that we will one day be released from our burdens. We can find some peace, knowing God hears our cries. We can have joy that God is with us always and provides us with a home in God's constant presence. And we can have love that is all-surpassing and will never end.

If and when we do go home for the holidays this year, may we not forget to celebrate the birth of this refugee baby who shows up. And then may we choose to follow him into the world's margins and show up for those who long to find a place they can call home.

### Discussion questions:

1. How has “homecoming” been or not been a part of your Christmas tradition? Why?
2. Who are the people in your community, city, country and throughout the world who might not relate to this emphasis on holiday homecoming? How can you address this and show up for such individuals or families?
3. How does the first Christmas event 2,000 years ago offer you hope, peace, joy and love?

### Closing prayer:

God of abundant love, we thank you for coming in the flesh to know us in our sufferings and to be with us always. We confess that too often we forget and ignore those around us who are longing to find a safe and loving home. Forgive us, we pray, and guide us as we continue to learn how to follow in your footsteps. We pray this in the name of your Son, who shows up in the midst of all our suffering and pain. Amen.



*The Rev. Emily Heitzman is an ordained Presbyterian serving as the shared pastor with youth and households for three ELCA congregations in the neighborhood of Edgewater in Chicago. You can read more of her reflections, sermons, and youth ministry lessons at her blog: <http://musingsfromabricolage.wordpress.com>.*

This article first appeared in the December 2014 issue of *Café* (boldcafe.org).



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12/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Homecoming

## Called to wait expectantly

by Emily Heitzman

**Every year at this time, as I turn on the TV or a Christmas music station, I am reminded of the many people who cannot relate to the majority of Christmas songs, TV shows and movies, which emphasize the importance of going home for the holidays. I cannot help but think about those who lack a safe place they can call home, whether they have been forced from their homes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, deportation, a broken relationship, violence, a natural disaster, or an unjust economic system.**

I know this is not one of our Advent texts, but as we approached Advent, I was reminded of Moses' call story in Exodus 3:1-12.

For many years, there had been a famine in the land of Canaan, and as a result, the Israelites left their homes in great numbers and traveled to Egypt to make a better life. However, Pharaoh disliked the growing numbers of Israelites who were taking refuge in his land. He did not want them to make Egypt their new home. So Pharaoh took advantage of the situation and turned these refugees into slaves. For centuries, the Hebrew refugees were forced into terrible working conditions and became victims of racism and violence. In their enslavement, they longed for release from their captivity and suffering and cried out to God.

And this is where Exodus 3 comes in. God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and calls out to him, saying: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of

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Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you;'" (Exodus 3:7-12)

Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time when we are called to wait for the coming of the One who will proclaim good news to the poor, bring release to the captives, give sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. It is a time when we are to wait for the One who will bring hope, peace, joy and love and who will shine light into the places of pain and injustice in this world.

And yet, we should not wait idly twiddling our thumbs. Rather, we are called to wait expectantly. To wait in preparation for the coming of this baby boy who will soon turn the worldly systems of injustice and oppression upside down. And it is a time when we are to equip ourselves so that we might become followers of this radical justice-proclaimer and peacemaker.

In Advent, we light one more candle each week and watch the light grow in the midst of the world's suffering. As we do, we are called to not only receive this light, but to shine it so that others might see God's path toward peace and justice and find their way home.

When God saw the suffering and oppression of God's people who were denied a true home, God called out to Moses from a burning bush, commissioning him to name and condemn injustice and to lead God's people to freedom. God called Moses to shine light so that the people of God could see a hopeful path and to offer them a new, safe place in which they could live.

And centuries later, as so many of God's people continue to experience violence and feel a sense of homelessness, God calls out to us, too:

*I have heard the cries of my people losing their homes in California, Puerto Rico, Indonesia, Honduras, and I have heard the cries of my children being separated from their parents. I know the sufferings of my children in Libya, Syria, Burma, and those who are at the Mexican border. I have come to deliver my people from detention centers, abuse, poverty, homelessness.*

*Go, lead my people out of the captivity of injustice and oppression and into a good and broad land. One in which all of my people will have access to food, shelter, and clean water. One in which all will be free from racism, homophobia, transphobia, or economic inequality. One where no child seeking asylum will be sprayed with tear gas or violently separated from their families.*

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*One where all of my children can call home.*

*Go, and tell the Pharaoh to let my people go.*

Like Moses, we may ask: "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring your people out of captivity?"

But in these times when we question our adequacy, let us hear God's answer to Moses: "I will be with you." And as we do, let us not forget that Jesus is our Immanuel, our God, who is with us always.

God is calling out to you. Will you answer?

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Who are today's Hebrew refugees that are held captive?
2. How is God calling you to tell Pharaoh to "let my people go?" (Exodus 5:1)
3. What is holding you back from responding to God's call?

### **Closing prayer:**

Everlasting God, we hear you calling out to us to help release your people from captivity. And yet, we often question our adequacy and let our fears of criticisms and failure hold us back from responding to your call. But here we are, Lord, ready to follow your lead. As we do, we ask that you give us words to proclaim good news to those who are poor, open our eyes so that we might see the needs of those around us, provide us with courage to speak out against injustices that keep others captive, and give us strength to persevere until all are freed from oppression. We ask these things your name, Amen.

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This article first appeared in the December 2014 issue of Cafe. <https://www.boldcafe.org/faith-reflections-traditions/>



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