

“COME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS (#5): COME HOME TO BETHLEHEM”

(Luke 2:1-20)

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**[CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATION]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-24-11]

--I--

1. (Christ Candle Text: Micah 5:2a-5) -- Read Text: Luke 2:1-20 and Pray.
2. Christian author and pastor James Harnish tells the true story of being part of a group tour of the Holy Land.

A--One of their tour guides was a Bible scholar who knew all the latest archaeological results and analysis of various biblical sites.

B--And when they came to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, where for centuries people believed that Jesus had been born, the guide informed Harnish's group in cold, analytical terms that recent archaeological evidence indicated that it was highly unlikely that Jesus was actually born there.

C--As he was finishing up his scientific lecture near the supposed birthplace, another tour group crowded in beside them.

1--Harnish says that the guide for that group was clearly not a scientific scholar, and was not very concerned about the historical accuracy of the site.

2--Instead, he says, this guide knelt on the floor in front of the group, and with a hushed reverence, in an almost mystical voice, whispered, *“Just think: this is the exact spot upon which our Lord was born, with angels singing and shepherds kneeling, and cattle lowing around him. This is place where Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.”*

3--And Harnish says that at that point, he overheard a member of his *own* tour group whisper longingly, *“I wish I were with that group!”*

3. You know, science and archaeology may be interesting, but on Christmas Eve there's just something deep inside each of us that simply wants to be at the place where Jesus was born.

A--There's a homesickness in our souls to get away from the holiday commercialism and instead to huddle in the stable with Mary and Joseph, to listen for the angels' song, and to kneel with the shepherds before the baby Jesus.

B--Something inside us, you see, moves us to want to be there -- that invites us (in the words of tonight's sermon title) to "*Come Home to Bethlehem.*"

C--Now, the roads were crowded with people that first Christmas, but the Roman authorities had ordered a census, and all people in Palestine had no choice but to return to their ancestral homes to be counted for taxation.

1--It was 80 miles from where Joseph lived in Nazareth to the small Jerusalem suburb of Bethlehem – not a long journey today, but in those days it was one you wouldn't take unless you absolutely *had* to... especially not with a pregnant wife.

2--And yet, it was a journey Joseph *had* to take with Mary because (as Verse 4 says), "*...He was descended from the house and family of David*" -- so Joseph came "home" to Bethlehem for Christmas.

4. And we can, too, when we recognize that "Bethlehem" represents at least two things to any of us who are willing to allow Christ be born in us today.

--II--

5. First of all, just as it did for Joseph, Bethlehem represents "**Who We ARE**" today - the "home" we grew up in, and the place where our identity was established.

A--You know, deep within each of us is the memory of the home in which we grew up.

1—We can probably all tell stories of the home in which we celebrated Christmas as a child, the place where we hung our stocking, or the table around which we ate Christmas dinner.

2--I remember my home in East Point, GA, the Nativity scene we set out every year, and the Advent calendar we opened each day leading up to Christmas Eve.

3--Each of us has our own memories of that home, and each memory is unique: some bring us joy and happiness that we all long to recreate; while others remind us of pain and hurt that we'd just as soon forget.

4—But, for better or worse, that home is the place from which each of us has come -- the place which helped define who we are today.

B--And whether we want to or not, at least spiritually, each of us must go back there (to the "Bethlehem" of our own past) if we're to have the strength to face the challenges and opportunities of the present.

1--You may remember that that's what Ebenezer Scrooge did in Charles' Dickens' classic tale A Christmas Carol: he took an unexpected and unwanted journey back to the deep places of his own past.

2--Scrooge went back to the places that defined who he was, and learned that only by going back to the "home" of his past could he receive the Christmas gift of new life for his present and future.

3--Like Scrooge, Joseph also went back to his home in Bethlehem, and Verse 7 tells us that while he was there he, too, experienced the Christmas gift of new life in the form of Jesus' birth.

C—And it's much the same in *our* lives today:..

1--...For us to face today's challenges, we must first journey back to the "home" of our past -- to the place where (with carol-writer Philip Brooks) we sing of our own "Bethlehem," "*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*"

2--...For, you see, if Jesus is to be born in us, it starts with us journeying to the place (the "home") which defines who we are -- to the place where *our* "hopes" and "fears" meet – to the "Bethlehem" that we, too, call "home."

6. And yet, in addition to representing "Who We Are" now, I believe Bethlehem also represents the "home" which we dream of *finding*... the place we look forward *TO*. It represents the person **"Who We Can BECOME"** through and with the help of Christ -- the fulfillment of our dreams.

A--That's what Bethlehem was for the Shepherds that first Christmas Eve night -- the fulfillment of their dreams for a Messiah!

1--Unlike Joseph, they went to Bethlehem not because they *had* to, but because they *wanted* to out of a deep longing in their homesick souls.

2--Verse 16 of tonight's scripture says that when they got there, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger at the end of their search.

B--You know, there are many people (including many of us here today) who're longing for something more out of life -- for a "Messiah," of sorts.

1--We want to *BE* someone more than we are now (i.e., a better spouse or parent).

2--Or we want to *HAVE* more than we have now (i.e., thinking we'll be happier if we just had that new house or car or gadget).

3--Or we want to *EXPERIENCE* more of life than we do now (i.e., to see the world and experience all it has to offer).

C--And so, we go about trying to find more in all kinds of ways.

1--We look for it in our misuse of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, gambling, or sex, or in the accumulation of material wealth; or in the promises of politicians. But we don't find it in these, and they just leave us empty inside.

2--Sometimes we think we'll find it through overt expressions of spirituality that *look* pious/religious on the *outside*, but in reality merely mask our own *inner* pain and hurt.

3--You see, too many of us search for a "Messiah" that'll solve all our problems and take away all our pain -- but we search in the wrong places.

D—And what we learn from the story of the Shepherds is that the *only* way you and I can find the fulfillment of our dreams -- ...

1--...the only way we can become the spouse, the parent, the child, the boss, the *person* that God wants (and created) us to be, and find purpose in life -- ...

2--...is by journeying to *Bethlehem* and kneeling and surrendering our lives at the manger of Jesus.

--III--

7. You see, the bottom line is that Bethlehem represents two "homes" within us:...

A--It represents (#1) the "home" from our past, symbolizing "*Who We Are*" -- how our identity in the *present* is shaped by our experiences of the *past*.

B--And it also represents (#2) the "home" we long for, symbolizing "*Who We Can BECOME*" -- the fulfillment of God's purpose in us when we give our hearts and lives to Jesus as our own Savior and Lord.

C--And in the end, both of these "homes" are the same. So tonight, God invites you and me to "come home" to that one place -- to "*Come Home to Bethlehem.*"

8. [PRAY]

9. [CLOSING HYMNS: "*Silent Night*", plus "*Joy to the World*"]

**NOTE:** The main points and many illustrations in this message were inspired and suggested to me by author and pastor James A. Harnish in his chapter “*Come Home to Bethlehem*” (Chapter 16), found in Christmas Reflections from James W. Moore, Reginald Mallett, J. Ellsworth Kalas, James A. Harnish, and Nell W. Mohny (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 2001), pp. 150-157.