

Christmas Is the Home We Need

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

December 20, 2015

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2 Kings 4:8–17 (CEB)

⁸One day Elisha went to Shunem. A rich woman lived there. She urged him to eat something, so whenever he passed by, he would stop in to eat some food. ⁹She said to her husband, “Look, I know that he is a holy man of God and he passes by regularly. ¹⁰Let’s make a small room on the roof. We’ll set up a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp for him there. Then when he comes to us, he can stay there.”

¹¹So one day Elisha came there, headed to the room on the roof, and lay down. ¹²He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call this Shunammite woman.” Gehazi called her, and she stood before him. ¹³Elisha then said to Gehazi, “Say to her, ‘Look, you’ve gone to all this trouble for us. What can I do for you? Is there anything I can say on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?’”

She said, “I’m content to live at home with my own people.”

¹⁴Elisha asked, “So what can be done for her?”

Gehazi said, “Well, she doesn’t have a son, and her husband is old.”

¹⁵Elisha said, “Call her.” So Gehazi called her, and she stood at the door. ¹⁶Elisha said, “About this time next year, you will be holding a son in your arms.”

But she said, “No, man of God, sir; don’t lie to your servant.”

¹⁷But the woman conceived and gave birth to a son at about the same time the next year. This was what Elisha had promised her.

Luke 2:1–7 (CEB)

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ²This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. ⁴Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. ⁵He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. ⁶While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Will you be home for Christmas this year? Where is that home?

By God’s grace, with Jesus, we are always home.

As of this fall, there are approximately 175,000 U.S. service members stationed overseas, but less than 25,000 family members.¹ Just a few years ago, there were hundreds of thousands more. Overseas deployments are very hard on military families and that is especially true at Christmas time. At the height of the Cold War more than 500,000 Americans were stationed overseas. Indeed, those serving overseas at Christmas have a theme song first recorded by Bing Crosby in 1943: “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” The closing lyrics say it all: “Christmas Eve will find me, where the love light gleams; I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.”

Christmas and home go together like the infant Jesus and a manger. So, one might assume that we could go to the Bible and find lots of stories extolling the virtues of home. But no, that isn’t the case, at least not when we think of home as we usually do. Instead, the Biblical stories are much more about wandering from place to place, finding shelter where one can, extending hospitality to the stranger, and so on. Here are two such stories.

¹ From an article by Adam Ashton in the Nov 24, 2015 online edition of the *Tacoma News Tribune*.

Making a home

One day, the prophet Elisha comes to Shunem, a town in the Jezreel Valley, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. One of the well-to-do townspeople, an unnamed woman, invites Elisha to her home for a meal. This is a kind gesture, but nothing special. I suppose they hit it off, because she gives Elisha an open invitation to come to her home to eat whenever he is in Shunem. (Elisha is an itinerant prophet of God, going where the Spirit sends him). With this invitation, the woman goes beyond what would be expected.

But then, this Shunammite woman rockets way past what might be expected of her and heads into the outer limits of radical hospitality. Knowing that Elisha is a holy man of God, she prepares a room that will be there waiting for Elisha whenever he needs it. Basically, she takes him in as a no-charge boarder on a come-and-go basis. She makes a home for this wandering prophet. Just pull that idea into your own world for a moment! How many of us would do such a thing.

And just look where it leads. There is no indication that the woman did any of this for some hope of reward, but that is still where her kindness leads. Kindness creates kindness, for the story is not over.

Elisha wants to do something for the woman who has been so kind and gracious to him. He offers to peddle his influence, which is considerable, but she has no need of it. By all appearances she is formidable in her own right.

But she is childless and that is a continual source of much sadness for her, as it was for all the women of her day who could have no children. The narrator leads us to think

No Room at the Inn?

When I was young, I pictured Joseph and Mary getting turned away from hotel after hotel until finally they collapsed of fatigue in someone's barn. But this is not the case.

Bethlehem was a tiny place at the time of Jesus' birth, probably too small to have any sort of public inn. Nor did the young couple probably have to find a cave to stay in. Most likely, they were taken in by one of the peasant families in Bethlehem, for all Jews were expected to take in travelers.

Most peasant homes consisted of a single large room, often with the sleeping quarters on a raised platform so that animals (the most important possessions) could be brought into house. Mary and Joseph probably had to make do with the animals' area, hence the presence of the manger (a feeding trough).

Note: Luke never mentions the presence of animals though that may be simply because they were commonplace.

that it isn't that she is too old, but that her husband is old, uninterested, and ineffectual.

So, Elisha tells her that she will have a son . . . and she does. The life-giving power of God is on display yet again.

After some years, the boy falls deathly ill. The boy's father seems to be useless in this, as he is in all matters. But the woman (still unnamed!) heads off to find Elisha. When she does, she pleads for his help. Elisha sends his servant, Gehazi, ahead to lay Elisha's staff across the boy's face until Elisha is able to get there. When Elisha gets there, the boy is dead, really truly dead.

After emptying the room, Elisha lays across the lifeless body and prays to God. Then, life is restored to the boy. Indeed yes, the LORD God is the giver of life. Perhaps home is simply where God is, where his people are.

The arrival of our true home

During our Advent journey we've looked at various signposts pointing us toward the Good News that is Christmas. Isaiah looked ahead to a day when light would crowd out the darkness and God would again be king. Zechariah, standing amidst the swirling scent of burning incense, was visited by an angel of the Lord who brought the astounding news that his wife would bear a son who would

“make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Mary too was visited by the angel Gabriel. She, a virgin, would give birth to a son. But unlike her cousin, Elizabeth, Mary’s son will be the “Son of the Most High,” the “Son of God.” These are the most extraordinary of events happening to the most ordinary of people. Yet, when we get to Jesus’ actual birth, everything seems quite ordinary for Mary and Joseph.

The two of them have made their way to Bethlehem for the census-taking, finding it a very crowded place. They’ve found a home in which to stay, though it seems that they have to sleep where the animals usually do. There, Mary has her baby and places him in a manger, a feed-trough. There are no angels, no wise men, no gifts, not even the mention of an animal!

As in our other stories, a home is made for the stranger, the wanderer. No one could really guess that in the birth of this child, our true home would be revealed as it never had been before.

And from his simple story of Jesus’ birth, Luke shifts the scene to a nearby hillside. There, shepherds are gathered for the night, guarding their herds. It is to them, not to any of Judea’s prominent and powerful citizens, nor even to Mary and Joseph, that an angel of God comes, proclaiming “good news of great joy.” Jesus has been born. The angel gives the shepherds a sign – but certainly *not* the sort of sign we would expect to accompany such a momentous proclamation. There is nothing miraculous about the sign, it is simply “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” The shepherds hurry to find the baby and when they do, with breathless excitement they tell Mary and Joseph about the angels. The shepherds have come home.

Savior . . . Messiah . . . Lord

Even lowly shepherds in ancient Jewish Palestine would have grasped the consequences of the angels’ proclamation that this infant, born in King David’s city, was “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” It is all there, packed into those few words. Though it boggles the mind, Mary’s baby was the Deliverer and Redeemer, the anointed of God, Ruler and Master of all creation. Augustus, who had pronounced his own father divine (making himself the “son of god”!), was no more than a bit player in the new world created by the birth of Mary’s baby. God had burst onto the world scene in a new way, turning it upside down. He had raised up the lowly and the humble. It was to the meek that the true Son of God had been born. It was in the most meager of places that the Son of the Most High, the Prince of Peace, had been born. Unlike Augustus, this child was not the bringer of mighty military victories but the bringer of God’s peace, and not just for a few, but for all.

And so, in that most modest of places, amidst the animals and mess, humanity found its true home. No more would people need to be rootless, wandering from one diversion to another, one purpose to another. Instead, in the manger we find that our lives have meaning, that we are here to do our part. As G.K. Chesterton puts it in this excerpt from his poem, ‘A Christmas House,’ in the manger, we find our home.

*A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
 We have hands that fashion and heads
that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky’s dome.*

*To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
 To the end of the way of the wandering
star,
To the things that cannot be and that
are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It can be challenging to consider that Christmas is really the home we need, that until we come to the manger, we are mere wanderers, nomads in a hostile world. Perhaps this is getting a bit easier for us, as Christianity becomes less and less the default belief of Americans. Have you felt like a wanderer lately? How so? In what ways is Jesus calling you home?
2. I am always drawn to two questions by Luke's story. *First*, who or what is really Lord of my life? Do I truly admit that Jesus is not only the master of me, but the master of everyone and everything? What does it really mean to confess that Jesus is Savior and Lord . . . in very practical everyday terms? *Second*, what does it mean (to me!) that God bypassed the powerful and successful at Jesus' birth, choosing instead two very ordinary and inconsequential people? In this birth, God has reversed all my notions of power and importance. How will I reflect this reversal in my own life?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Matthew 1:18-25 An angel visits Mary to tell her that she will bear a son	Tuesday, Matthew 2 Jesus' birth, the wise men, and the flight to Egypt. Read this carefully . . . it is different from what you expect!
Wednesday, Luke 1 All the announcement to Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary	Thursday, Luke 2:1-40 Jesus' birth and his presentation at the temple
Friday, Luke 2:41-52 Jesus wanders away from his parents during a family trip to Jerusalem.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew's Gospel

We will begin the book of Jonah on January 11

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Acts

We will begin a study of Philippians on January 12

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

These classes will not meet the weeks of Dec 27 and Jan 3

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Continuing this week:

The Story that is Handel's Messiah

This class will not meet on December 27

Beginning January 10, a new series:

The History of Heaven