

Christmas Parade of Homes: Carol Sing at Luke's House
Isaiah 7:10-15 and Luke 2:1-20
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Marilynne Robinson, wrote a beautiful best-selling book, entitled *Home*. It's about an aging Presbyterian minister, near the end of his life, living in the same house in which he and his wife raised their family. He's a widower and in declining health, when his two adult children come home to care for him. Glory, the youngest daughter is a dutiful, loyal school teacher, and Jack is the family renegade, always in trouble of one kind or another, sometimes in jail, and absent from the family for long periods of time. Now Jack is home, and it's wonderful and awkward and very complex.

Glory asks Jack why he has come home now. "I just wanted to come home," he answers. "Even if I couldn't stay, I wanted to see the place. I wanted to see my father..." Glory looks around the old house she will some day inherit and tells Jack she won't change anything, saying, "If you ever need to come home, I'll be there." Jack responds, quoting an old hymn he sang as a child: "*Yes. Ye who are weary, come home... Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling to you and to me. Come home, come home.*"

There is something about this faith of ours that is about coming home, coming to our true home—where God's love for us in Jesus Christ is made known. And like Jack, that character in the novel, the best way to get there is, perhaps, by singing. We sing ourselves into this Christmas story Luke tells.

During Advent we have toured each of the gospel homes and considered their unique perspectives on the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. Mark's house had no Christmas décor whatsoever because he's more focused on Easter than Jesus' birth. John's house lit up the

night with a candle in every window, while he describes Christ's coming as light in darkness. Matthew had a huge family reunion with generations of Jesus' kin-folk crowding around, telling wild tales of the way God unfolds the history of salvation through long years, and how God works through flawed and saintly people just like us.

But no gospel has the house decked out for Christmas quite like Luke. Luke has a Christmas tree in the front window of the living room, and a fire in the fireplace with ancient smells of warmth in winter; there are presents under the tree—gifts of God's love and mercy and peace, wrapped so exquisitely that once you open them in awe, you might carefully fold and save the wrapping paper forever.

At Luke's house there is an angel named Gabriel, appearing to Mary, saying, "Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God!" Gabriel repeats the first thing any biblical angel ever says, "Do not be afraid," because recipients of angel messages can't help but quake before their power and glory and startling words from on high.

At Luke's house, there are sheep grazing in the yard, in anticipation of shepherds' crooks leaning against the front porch. There is a heavenly chorus hovering and singing in the windy skies, as bright as stars. And best of all, on the mantel inside, there is the manger scene where we can peek in and see the baby.

You open the front door to Luke's house, and a warmth and glow of holiness wraps around you in welcome—it welcomes you home. Yes...

*Ye who are weary, come home...
Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling,
calling to you and to me.
Come home, come home."*

Now, the interesting thing about Luke's Christmas story is that even though it is set apart for its beauty, and welcomes us into the comfortable and familiar story of that silent, holy night, like Matthew, it

is still very much in the real world. There is a newspaper folded on the front hall table, reminding anyone who enters that this baby born and laid in a manger, was up against some formidable powers of the day. Caesar Augustus had literally maneuvered the Roman senate in 42 B.C. to declare him—Caesar Augustus—the divine son. His reign would be marked by peace throughout the Roman Empire: Pax Augusta, Pax Romana, but it was a peace enforced with Rome’s iron fist.

In the eastern Mediterranean world, Caesar Augustus was hailed as a god, and one Greek artifact even claims Augustus to be the “savior of the world.” So when the gospel says, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered,” Luke emphasizes a dramatic contrast, making the unusual claim that this baby born in the city of David, is the *real* Savior.

But there is not much evidence of that at the time of this baby’s birth. Kings are born in palaces, not stables. Royal babies are cradled in soft blankets, not straw. Heirs to the throne would know wealth, not poverty. Jerusalem was the royal city, not Bethlehem.

By naming the contrast of the powers of this world, Luke wants us to know from the beginning Who is Who, and which of the two, Emperor or Jesus, has the real power. God does not come to us through imperial might in the highest seats in the land, but through a child, who grows up to show us how God loves and heals, forgives and gives us new life in his name.

Jon Walton, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, has said:

“In a way that none of the other gospel writers do, Luke tells us what Mark cannot find words to say, what Matthew remembers with a different twist, and what John implies without the details—that the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us.

He is born unlike any king we have ever seen... in a place that we might not have noticed, to a family that is nothing if not obscure, except that at his birth, all the heavens sing.”¹

There is no logic in trying to explain it. We just tell the story over and over again, and we sing about it over and over again, until, through the lovely, familiar repetition of it, we realize that because of baby Jesus we ourselves have come home in the presence of God. The home we long for, and belong to, is finally where Christ is. As Frederick Buechner put it: “I believe our home is Christ’s kingdom, which exists both within us - and among us - as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it.”

So.... if you have come to worship on this Christmas Eve searching for some good news from on high, then welcome to Luke’s house. Here there is warmth and firelight, here is a bedtime story that will inspire sweet dreams; here, for at least a moment, is rest for the weary, and rest for a weary world. In the midst of great earthly conflict and international power struggles, here the word from Luke’s gospel is: Do not be afraid; the Lord is with us. Be reassured that God is God, and we too are his children.

When baby Jesus was laid in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn, it means he is born – not in this house or that – because he was never meant to have a home of his own. He was laid in a place of feeding for all the world to see that in him was the light of all people, and in him was bread for the world. Remember that a grown up Jesus will say to those who question his identity: “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” That’s because his crib, from infancy, is in the world, so that wherever our lives may lead us we can find in him our heart’s true and only home.

¹ Christmas at Luke’s House, Westminster Presbyterian, Wilmington, DE.

Professor of Humanities, Wendy Wright, recalls a frenetic grocery shopping outing in mid-winter Boston with snow on the ground, the threat of impending storms in the air, and her crying toddler was not happy to be on this emergency outing in an overcrowded store filled with other shoppers panicked about more snow. She was near a breaking point she remembers, writing:

“At our church, the music of the season had been liturgically correct, refraining from breaking into Christmas songs until the day itself, filling our hearts and minds instead with hymns of longing and anticipation: *O come, O come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel.*

I certainly felt like I needed to be ransomed that day as I narrowly escaped colliding with a swiftly moving vehicle that had pulled in front of me at the grocery store. I pulled into the parking lot and... inside the store, I lost track of any sense of the season... in the overheated interior, struggling to find space for the crowd, and in the shopping basket for a toddler and bulky jackets and mufflers.

I wanted to cry, but my toddler was beating me to it because I was trying to extract from her a sheet of rumpled paper she had stuffed into her mouth. It was the grocery list of course. I had just entered the canned vegetable section and was trying to make out the writing on the shredded piece of paper I had taken from her, and I had just reached my hand out to pick up a can of tomato paste, when I was suddenly stopped.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!

The percussive upbeat of the first notes of the carol bored a hole into my awareness as the supermarket Musak was suddenly switched on.

Let earth receive her king!

I stood there transfixed with the tomato paste in my hand.

Let every heart prepare him room.

The floodgates of my heart flung open and a vast and spacious wonderment filled me.

And heaven and nature sing....

Then the professor and theologian Wright says: I did start to cry not out of frustration or fatigue, but out of a sense of the vividness of the promise, out of a sense of the magnificence of God's mercy and God's desire for us. God's children. We are God's children.

I picked up my fretful daughter and held her, and I sang into her wet cheek:

*And heaven - and heaven - and nature sing."*²

Into whatever frenetic chaos the days and weeks ahead may lead you, just remember: wherever you are, the Lord is with you. Jesus was born and laid down, not in a house but in the world, in a place of feeding for the world, so that wherever we are – we are at home in him.

AMEN.

² Wendy Wright, *The Vigil*, p. 27-28.