

Christmas Reservations

[Luke 2:1-6](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, December 9, 2001

[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

Throughout this year I am preaching on the theme "Walking with God." During the four weeks of Advent, we are joining the characters of the nativity in walking to Bethlehem. That's the place where God became flesh, and the place where we are finally at home.

Christmas isn't a spontaneous kind of holiday. It takes a lot of planning, preparations, and reservations. There are reservations with planes, restaurants, hotels, and family. We have a lot of reservations when it comes to family. But I have discovered that the greatest reservation people have on the second week of December is whether or not they will be able to get into the Christmas spirit this year.

You're suppose to be really happy by the 25th of the month, ready to sing Joy to the World, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, Fa la la la la la la la. By the 25th it's all family, trees, lights, presents, peace on Earth, and God bless us everyone. Our expectations of Christmas are all about happiness.

Happiness is always elusive as a goal. But when it becomes the goal of Christmas, happiness serves as a judgment upon us. Because happiness is a hard place to find.

The Christmas story actually starts somewhere around the third chapter of Genesis, right after Adam and Eve, and you and I, got kicked out the Garden of Eden. Now that was a happy place. In fact, it was paradise. But because we reached for more than we were created to have, the happy place became paradise lost for us. We are told that when Adam and Eve left the garden, God placed an angel with a flaming sword at the gate. So there's no going back to the naive happiness we once knew. Like their son Cain, we have been cursed to wander the earth. All of life is now lived East of Eden.

As the biblical story continues, we find men and women, and ourselves, wandering about looking for a place where we will be at home and where paradise will be restored. For a while the Hebrews had that place in the Promised Land. But they lost it, just as we keep losing the homes we have. No matter how happy your home is on earth, no one gets to keep home as long as they want it. In the words of Jeremiah, "Why are you like an alien in the land, a traveler who stays in lodgings?" (14:8). Why? Because we are looking for our lost paradise. So the story of wandering continues.

When we turn to the New Testament, how does Luke begin his part of the story but with Mary and Joseph far from home, wandering, in search of a place to give birth to the child who left his home in heaven? When the child became a man, he left his home again in Nazareth, and walked the roads of Galilee calling his disciples to leave their homes to follow him. When we get to the end of the gospels, we find the disciples hoping that the risen Jesus will restore paradise by establishing the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem. But through persecution the young church was soon scattered, and again the followers of Christ began to wander. So have we continued to wander through history in search of the place where the joyful Kingdom has come.

In the last generations, we have seen quite a bit of this wandering in our own American society. My grandfather belonged to a generation of settlers. He lived out most of his life on the tobacco farm that had been in his family for more than 100 years. Others of his generation immigrated from a variety of places to come to the cities or other rural areas, all with the hope of settling into a better place. It may have been a better place, but life in either the cities or the farms was still hard, not a happy place, and clearly not paradise. But they knew, at least, where home was. It was the place for which they had settled.

Society began to change when my father was a young man. Technology, industry, education, and government all invited his generation to leave the farms and cities. Thousands upon thousands took advantage of the G.I. Bill, got an education at a land grant university, a job at one of the new corporations, and then moved their families into a new place called suburbs. My father's generation lived far from the old farms and city neighborhoods, but they never forgot where home was. Thus, they were a generation, not of settlers as their parents, but exiles. As happy as they were living on beautifully sculptured avenues, at Christmas the exiles would load the family in the station wagon and head home for the holidays. That is because exiles can't "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land." As nice as it was to have matching avocado kitchen appliances, their souls longed for the home they knew was someplace else.

Today we are no longer exiles, or settlers, but nomads who haven't a clue about where home is. Ask most people today where home is and usually you'll get a long reflective pause. Then they may list all the places where they grew up, but usually they conclude by saying, "That's not really home anymore. My parents don't even live there now." When asked about home, others will say something sentimental about their friends. Still others will say something dopey about home being the place where you hang your hat. What they won't say is that they can't imagine moving. If you really press them to tell you why they are living where they are, most often the answer will involve somebody's job.

The nomad lives in a world with very few borders. Now we are free to travel everywhere, move anywhere, but are at home nowhere. We have freedoms our settler grandparents never imagined, and comforts our exiled parents only dreamed about, but we cannot find the place called happiness. Nomads just roam, whenever we think the prospects for happiness are better someplace else. Geography, we say, doesn't really matter anymore. Given the advances in communications, and the relative ease of travel, we keep

telling ourselves that geography, or place, just isn't important. But if that is true it means that wherever we are staying, it's always no place special. So we are never at home.

Again, this isn't really as new a dynamic as we think. It's actually as old as Adam and Eve, where the story began. We were created to live in paradise, and so the yearning for Eden persists in our souls. Especially at Christmas. Because it is hard not to be at home at Christmas.

Now we are ready to return to the Christmas story. The Bible gives us so few details about the birth of Jesus. Matthew doesn't tell us anything at all. Luke only gives us two verses, our text today. And all that Luke actually tells us about the birth of Jesus is, "she laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn." Isn't that striking? The only thing the Gospel wants to make clear about Jesus' actual birth is that there was no place for him.

The Savior was born in no place, which is exactly where we live today. In the words of Jeremiah, he wasn't even born as a traveler who stays in lodgings. He was born on the road, no place special, and put into a manger, again, no place special.

The manger is very important to Luke. He mentions it three times in the second chapter, and he portrays the angel telling the shepherds that this will be a sign to you, "You will find the child in a manger." So what is the manger a sign of? That God became homeless, to make a home with people who aren't at home.

Notice how tenderly this happens at the first Christmas. Some shepherds who were out in the field, no place special, were invited to see their Savior who was cradled in an unremarkable manger. As the story unfolds, we read that after they beheld the baby, they return glorifying and praising God. Why? Because in the advent of the Savior, no place suddenly became a sacred place, and the shepherds got a glimpse of paradise. Later foreigners from the East, who had become lost in their wanderings, rediscovered the star they had been following and they "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." Why? Because they could stop wandering, searching, and yearning.

This changes everything about the pursuit of paradise and happiness. The Christmas story says you don't find the happy home. It has found you. Happiness is not a goal to be obtained; it is a grace to be received. It is your Christmas gift from God. You receive this gift by receiving the Christ child. And you receive the Christ child by preparing room for him. And you prepare room for him by confessing your need.

The poet John Keats wrote about the importance of coming to terms with your "negative capability." Your negative capability is your ability to stay in a place where you feel what you are not, and where you encounter what God is. In other words, it is the place in your soul where you make room for the sacred. It is the empty place, the anxious or doubting place, the part of you that is least holy. And it is into this negative space that the Savior fits just perfectly.

We in the church don't talk about the divine inner self. That's because when we dig down to the bottom of our souls, we find nothing but an empty manger. But as we confess that truth we make room for the Christ child to be placed into our souls. It is only the empty vessel that can be filled. Then we discover what St. John meant when he said, "The home of God is among mortals."

So if you are having reservations about being at home with all the Christmas joy this year, don't fret. That is your call to worship, your negative capability, or your way of preparing room for a Savior. You don't have to get happy to get to Christmas. You just tell the truth and head for the manger.

I think this was what G. K. Chesterton was getting at in his poem, *The House of Christmas*, which ends as follows:

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.

It sounds like paradise. Amen.