

Christmas 2020

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Home For Christmas

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Despite becoming one of the most beloved, requested, and popular Christmas songs of all time, this Christmas Classic almost wasn't recorded because music executives thought it was too sad for a holiday that is supposed to be happy. However, one singer disagreed with the executives when he heard it sung to him by the song's writer while they were playing golf in 1943. This popular crooner of the day thought it was a beautiful song and agreed to record it. That singer was none other than Bing Crosby, who was good to his word. He not only recorded the song, he had it put on the B side of the record of his most well-loved Christmas song *White Christmas*.

That is the legend behind the song *I'll Be Home For Christmas* which was recorded when America and much of the world was in the midst of World War II. The song was reportedly an instant hit, not only in America, but around the world. Far from making people feel sad, as the music executives had feared, the song gave people hope, and especially spoke to the men and women serving in the military who certainly would not be able to be home for Christmas and their families who were missing them.

For those of you who might need the reminder, the song opens with the singer dreaming about Christmas at home, asking for cherished Christmas traditions like "snow, mistletoe, and presents on the tree." It all sounds very warm and comforting, until the last line that goes: "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." Which clearly means the singer won't be home to enjoy their family or beloved traditions. Despite its sad ending, the song remains popular to this day, especially with military families who are more practiced at celebrating holidays like Christmas without loved ones than many of us.

Perhaps part of the reason for the song's enduring popularity is that it embraces both the beauty and comfort of Christmas along with a sadness that can sometimes accompany these festive times. It's a song that in its way speaks to reality, and at the same time infers that the reality and sadness of separation can't diminish the love and light that is Christmas. In that truth is the hope that is what Christmas is about, because Christmas celebrates a different kind of homecoming. What we celebrate at Christmas isn't the family gathered together, or the presents, or frozen

precipitation, or any of our cherished traditions. Christmas is the celebration of when God chose to come and make God's home with us.

The idea of God making God's home on earth is not a new one. It started back in Genesis when God walked in the Garden with the first man and woman in the cool of the evening. Later, the idea manifested when prophets like Elijah and Moses would go to mountain tops to speak to and listen to God. The idea of God having a home on earth was deepened when the Israelites were on their forty-year journey and carried the Ark of the Covenant with them. It was believed the Ark was a seat for God, and they constructed a tent to cover the Ark and to be a place their leaders went to talk to and listen to God. Deep in the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Samuel, we read about the time King David looked out the window of his house at the tent of the Ark of the Covenant and thought to himself it wasn't right that he should have a finer, sturdier house than God and decided to build one. However, in that story, God said David was not suited to build God's house because he was a man of war. The task fell to David's son Solomon to build a temple for the Ark. Over time, the idea of God making God's home here on earth became less incarnational, of God dwelling with us, and more centered on the buildings as being the only places on earth where God can be found.

The idea that churches and temples and mosques are God's houses exists to this day. And indeed, they are places people gather to speak to and listen to God and to each other. They are places we dedicate to prayer and sacrifice and all the stuff of worship. There is nothing wrong with this. Churches, temples, and mosques are important for our religious life together. However, there is a problem that can emerge from this idea: the misconception that God can be found *only* in God's house because God is too good or too holy to be amongst common people in common places. That can make us feel pretty lonely and separate from God whenever we aren't in church.

The birth of Jesus, the Gospel writers tell us, did not take place in a grand temple, or palace. When God chose to enter in flesh into God's creation, God chose a family with no money, no high social status and the scandal caused by Mary's and Joseph's yes to God. When God chose to enter into the world, God did not choose to be born into a financially stable, politically powerful, socially secure situation cut off from the reality of so many people. Instead, God chose to enter into the messy, uncertain, sometimes lonely, struggling lives of so much of humanity. This very real world is where God came home.

The mystery of the Incarnation reveals God loves us so much God is not afraid to make God's home among even the hardest, loneliest situations with us. And by so doing, shows us God's love and inspires us to love each other through such hard times.

A beautiful example of this happened in 1943, the same year the song *I'll Be Home For Christmas* was written and recorded, on the battleship the USS North Carolina. Not long before Christmas, the chaplain on this battleship had an idea to try to ease the sorrow of the service men who would not be spending Christmas with their families. The chaplain collected \$5 from each serviceman and sent the money to Macy's department store along with the names and address of their families and asked the money be used to purchase gifts and send them to their families for Christmas. Not only did Macy's follow through on the chaplain's request, they were inspired to give something to the servicemen that Christmas to help them feel connected to the families they couldn't be with in person.

On Christmas Day, the servicemen gathered for holiday entertainment of music and skits. When the entertainment was over, the chaplain stood up and announced there was one more special gift to be given. A large movie screen was set up, along with a movie projector that began playing a movie reel. Only it wasn't playing a Hollywood movie, it was personal messages for each of the servicemen from their families telling them how much they loved them, missed them, and wished them a Merry Christmas.

Turns out someone at Macy's had been inspired to use the USS North Carolina's service men's families contact information to reach out to them and invite them to go to the closest Macy's store and record a special greeting for their serviceman. It was a beautiful gift, one that brought many of the servicemen to tears and for the briefest but most cherished and important moment, shortened the distance between them and their loved ones that Christmas. If not in reality, then in their hearts, they were home for Christmas. It was a Christmas message that was both sad and beautiful at the same time, which made it hopeful.

Many people in our country aren't going home for Christmas this year, and there is a sadness in this reality, even though it is a sacrifice they are making for the wellbeing of communities and hospitals. Over 300,000 families in our country are grieving the loss of family or friends to COVID-19 this Christmas. Ours isn't the only parish to offer on-line only Christmas services instead of the big worship services we

enjoy and look forward to. There's a lot of grief in all this. And I've heard so many people say they aren't feeling the "Christmas Spirit" because of it. And it's okay to feel sad and miss those traditions we love and look forward to -- singing silent night in the Church service, mistletoe, caroling, presents under the tree, and family gathered around a crowded table. It's okay to name what we are missing this year, just like in the song *I'll Be Home For Christmas*.

Perhaps that sadness is also the very thing to help us remember when God became flesh and made God's home among us, God did not shy away from such troubles and difficulties and instead chose to share them with us. God is with us now, not in a dream, but very much present both in what we feel, and in the love that we still have with our families and friends, love that cannot die or be broken by physical distance, not even death. Just like the families the servicemen aboard the USS North Carolina discovered on Christmas Day in 1943.

This year perhaps more than any other year we need the reminder that Christmas is when we celebrate not the birth of a baby, but when God came home through the birth of Jesus, to be at home with us wherever we happen to be: in a church, with family or friends, alone, working at hospitals, or serving in the military, to show us how deeply God loves us, so that we can love God and each other and learn how our love for each other and God's love for us bridges any distance between us.

I feel very sad about not worshiping with you in person this Christmas Eve. I miss you and I love you. Yet I believe the health of our community is important, even more so than our traditions. Even though we cannot gather in our beautiful church and feel God's loving presence, I trust God's tremendous love is still with you, right where you are, despite our distance, and my Christmas prayer this year is for all of you. No matter where we find ourselves this Christmas, I trust God's love light is shining on you, and when we can gather together again, I have no doubts whatsoever we will let that love light shine. It might even feel like coming home.

Merry Christmas, and God Bless You.