

## ADVENT ONE, 2020 Coming Home for Christmas

By Major Deborah Coles

If you have access to a recording, or YouTube, play the song: "I'll be home for Christmas". Read Psalm 84, slowly, aloud.

When my brother Mark and I were students in Ontario, my parents and the rest of our family lived in Saskatoon. Once exams were finally over, we got a midnight flight on Christmas Eve to go "home".

It wasn't really "home" for either of us. We didn't live there and had never been there. But it was where our family was, so it was "home".

One of my favourite Christmas memories of all time is arriving at the little airport, where crowds of people were waiting to meet their loved ones and take them home for the holidays. As we came down the escalator, we heard a brass ensemble: it was our dad and 4 younger brothers playing to welcome us!

Apparently they had been entertaining the whole airport while they waited for us. It was such a happy moment. We were together, all 8 of us. I knew that this was what I wanted for Christmas.

When we lived in Ottawa, a student from Zimbabwe stayed with us for a few months. His name was Shingayi, and due to government restrictions, his family wasn't able to get him all the funds he needed for rent while he attended University of Ottawa. So we moved Tamara to Ben's room, put Shingayi in Tamara's room – and Ben – well, Ben tended to travel at night anyway, so he was okay for a while!

I wanted to make Shingayi feel welcome, and I wanted to find out about a traditional Zimbabwean Christmas. I asked him what kinds of food they served at Christmas, and he just smiled and said, "It doesn't matter."

I thought maybe he didn't understand my question, so I reworded it. "What is your favourite Christmas dish?" – and again, I got the same answer, the same smile. "It doesn't matter."

Finally, I got the point. In Zimbabwe, it is not the menu that counts. It is the company, the being together, that counts. Being together. Being home.

Not everyone gets to go home for the holidays. Some are too far away. Some can't afford to travel. Some are serving or working and cannot leave their responsibilities. Some people are estranged from family and loved ones. Others have no relatives to spend time with. For many people, grief and mourning fill their hearts at this time of joy and delight. And some, as we know, have no homes because they are homeless.

Earlier, we remembered the song "I'll be home for Christmas."

I think of another Christmas song, a "feel-good" song. "Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays."

One of the worst things we have done to "home for the holidays" is take away the "home". We are too busy to welcome each other.

We need to keep ourselves from being too busy to welcome each other "home". We need to keep some emotional energy for each other, or we will find ourselves too stressed to care.

Not only have we taken away the "home" but we have taken the "holy" out of "holiday".

The word "holiday" is shortened from "holy day". But the days of Christmas have become holidays and no longer Holy days. Everything bunches up on the calendar at this time of year. Students are struggling with exams and assignments and working extra hours. Christian musicians are rehearsing valiantly for special concerts. School children have various activities.

Even the special acts of Christmas kindness cause lots of extra work: scheduling kettle workers to raise funds not just for Christmas but for relief throughout the winter; finding people with time to help serve Christmas dinners or visit nursing homes.

Who has the time to ponder anything in our hearts, as Mary did long ago? Who has the energy to make anyone feel welcome in our presence?

I wonder: would it be different to come home for the Holy days? Would "home" feel homier?

The writer of Psalm 84 feels "at home" in God's house. "Even the sparrow has found a nest." (Psalm 84:3) The psalmist knows that the most insignificant little creature is content in God's house and in God's

presence. The people of Israel understood that the place represented the presence of God.

The psalmist senses security and beauty there which makes him yearn to “hang around”. “I’ve always longed to live in a place like this, always dreamed of a room in Your house, where I could sing for joy to God–Alive!” (84:2, The Message)

“One day spent in Your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek island beaches.” (84:10, The Message) Or in more familiar wording: “Better is one day in your courts

than a thousand elsewhere.” (84:10, NIV) Why?

“For the Lord God is a sun and a shield, the Lord bestows favour and honour; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless.” (11)

What does it take to make you feel at home at Southmount Citadel? What does it take from us for you to feel at home here? And what does it take from you, for the rest of us to feel “at home”?

Just as you invest in your home, buying curtains for the windows and cleaner for the floors, you need to invest in the house, and the people, of God to feel at home here.

So – invest time. We can’t meet in big groups or even small groups! Our best bet this Christmas 2020 is to invest time in prayer as prayer warriors.

Invest talent. Again, this year it's hard to share your talent at the citadel! If you think of a creative way to build community, please let me know! We do appreciate our musicians very much when we are able to worship together, as well as our behind-the-scenes people helping with the easy worship system, and at the door taking temperatures.

The Psalmist loves God's house. He longs to spend time there, because for him, this is the place where the God of the Angel Armies lives – it is the Lord's headquarters.

The Psalmist knows that God is the protector of His people. He lived in uncertain times, just as we do. When he was living, there were terrorist threats, and the worry of drought, famine, and just as we experience right now, the fear of sickness and death.

The house of God is meant to be a safe place. Safe is how "home" is supposed to be. Safe is knowing you belong, even if you've messed up.

As Robert Frost says, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." This is how our homes should be. This is how a house of worship should be.

Coming home for Christmas this year probably will not include traveling to the town where you were born. It may mean simply staying home. Can we stay home for Christmas and discover the presence of Emmanuel in a different way?

If you do not have a healthy relationship with Jesus as your Saviour, coming home for Christmas may mean discovering that relationship. If

you are saved, but not living a life that pleases God, coming home for Christmas may mean making Jesus the Lord of your life.

Southmount Citadel, our church home, is just a taste of our Ultimate Home on the New Earth. When Jesus comes again, all will be made new, and righteousness and justice will reign. The fellowship and communion we experience here is designed to whet our appetite for that new home.

In our previous songbook, in the song "My God I am Thine", we find the words "Yet onward I haste to the heavenly feast, That, that is the fullness, but this is the taste!" Our fellowship and worship now are just the appetizer. The feast takes place later, at Heaven's banquet table.

You are cordially invited to come home for Christmas. Come home to a right relationship with God. That relationship is expressed in your worship and fellowship at your corps, and this year, at home. And prepare yourself for feeling truly at home, with Jesus, when He comes again.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,  
Calling for you and for me;  
Patiently Jesus is waiting and watching,  
Watching for you and for me.

Refrain:

Come home, come home,  
Ye who are weary, come home;

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling—  
Calling, "O sinner, come home!"

Pray: Our Father in Heaven, we thank You for the blessings of Christmas. Help us to prepare our hearts for these holy days. Help us to keep them 'holy'. And may we find ways to welcome others into community. May others feel 'at home' with us. Some day we will all be together, joyfully worshiping You. Until then, may our homes reflect the welcoming ways of Your Temple in the days of the Psalmist. Lord of Heaven's hosts, we worship You now. In the holy name of Jesus, our Emmanuel, we pray. Amen.