



When You Can't Go Home for Christmas

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I've had a couple of days to visit with my parents this week. While I enjoyed my time with my mom and dad, I wasn't able to make it home. For the past 25 years or so, when I talk about visits back home, I refer to a small farm that sits next to the East Harrison Street Church of God outside of Charleston, IL. That's where I did most of my growing up. That's the last place I lived with my parents. For the better part of the past two and half decades I've always enjoyed my visits back home.



Mom and Dad sold that house several years ago and moved to Indiana. While I always enjoy the time I get to spend with my parents, it's painfully obvious that it's not like going home. Visits home always involved driving on back roads where I knew every twist and turn like the back of my hand and where familiar sights would bring a flood of memories from my youth. Visits back home would always involve trips to some of my favorite eating establishments like Pagliai's Pizza, where the large house special is exceptionally good, unlike another other pizza in the world. Visits back home would almost always involve catching up with a small circle of friends and making plans for the next time I might be back home.

Everything is different now. I didn't get to go home this week, but I did get to visit with my mom and dad. In many respects, home doesn't exist anymore.

I think most of us look forward to the holiday season: the traditions, the visits with family, a little different rhythm than the rest of the year, and even a trip home for some of the lucky ones. As much as we might look forward to this season, we also need to recognize that there are many in our midst who may approach the season with mixed emotions because of their inability to go home this Christmas. Perhaps all of us live with the sense that, in some way, we can't get back home anymore.

For some, the inability to go home may mean that they can't return to a childhood home for the holidays. For others, the inability to go home has nothing to do with a physical location as much as a radical and unwanted change in their lives. It's the wife who will celebrate her first Christmas without the husband that she loved and built a life with before he was taken way too soon. It's the children celebrating their first Christmas without their mom or dad. It's the grandchildren facing their first Christmas without grandma or grandpa. It's the parents who will attempt to navigate their first Christmas after the death of a son or daughter. It's the husband trying to move forward after his wife of thirty years has divorced him. It's the eighty-year-old that can't do the things he or she did in his or her younger years; everything is more difficult now. There may be a gathering, there may still be some of

the traditions, but everything has changed and it doesn't seem like home this year.

I'm told that dementia patients often talk about wanting to go home. Even when they are sitting in their own living room, they'll often talk about needing to get back home. I've also come to understand that their longing for home isn't so much about going to a different physical location as much as going back to a different time when their mind and body were free of the devastating effects of dementia. They just want to go back to the way things were before the disease wreaked havoc on their lives.

For all of us, there is a very real notion that we cannot get home for Christmas. There's a gnawing sense in each one of us that we can't get back to the way things used to be, back to the way things were supposed to be. There's something innate in us that tells us that divorce, heartache, tragedy, cancer, dementia, illness and death weren't supposed to be a part of our experience as human beings. We want to go home, but we can't. We want to go back before we felt death's sting, before we knew the reality of pain or brokenness, but we can't.

This Christmas, many are in search of the hope that only comes through the one who was born in a manger. This Christmas, many who are longing to go home need to hear the words of the one who has not only come into our world, but will come once again to heal, restore and make all things new. Many of our own brothers and sisters, in the midst of their pain and longing for what once was, need to be reminded of these powerful words from John's Revelation (21: 3-5):

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Let's be people who are more aware of the difficulty that this season will bring for those who feel the very real pain of not being able to get back home for the holidays. Let's be willing to be present with those who will struggle in the midst of presents, wrapping and all the other traditions of the season. Let's remind them (and remind ourselves) of the One who has come and is coming again to heal, restore and make things new. Let's demonstrate and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Christ's Peace,

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