

Advent IV (2020)

Before coming to Blue Ridge, I was at the state mental hospital in our neighbouring state of Alabama. Let me hasten to clarify . . . I did clinical pastoral training at this hospital.

In any case, there was a curious phenomenon at this institution. From time to time, former residents would come to the gates and want to come back. Why?

Well, because for them the facility with its towering oaks and antebellum buildings represented security and peace. In short, it was home.

Many had lived there 30, 40, 50 years. Then a court case came along in the early 1970s which mandated patients must be placed in the least restrictive environment possible. As a result, many long-time residents were turned out.

It was sad. There, these folks had garden plots, chickens, friends, a routine. Again, for them, it represented home.

And what a beautiful and evocative word “home” is.

“Home is where the heart is,” it has been said.

Robert Frost wrote: **“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”** (Unless, of course, that place is the state mental hospital in Alabama.)

Home is memories. “It takes a heap o’ livin’ in a house t’ make it home,” said the poet Edgar Guest.

And, home is the place where people’s thoughts turn at Christmas time.

*I’ll be home for Christmas
You can plan on me
Please have snow and mistletoe
And presents on the tree.*

*Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams.*

Crooned Bing Crosby.

Home is indeed the places where people's thoughts turn at Christmas. Hence, scenes of hearth and home are often featured on Christmas cards. I am holding in my hand one mailed Dec. 16, 1946, 10 years before I was born. It was sent by my mother and father to my mother's folks in Clinton, Miss.

Looking at the picture on the front gives you the same feeling as Bing Crosby's popular holiday song. It tugs at your heart strings and creates a desire, a desire to go home.

A living room is pictured. Here are holly berries, garlands of evergreens, the luminous glow of candlelight and snow outside a picture window. And to complete the scene, there is an open Bible on a table.

Visions of home, of safe havens, go back a long way. Isaiah, for example, in today's Old Testament reading, writes:

“And my people [God is speaking here] shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.”

Then and now people long for such places, even if it is in their dreams.

More than that, Isaiah tells us that such dwellings are possible and will come.

He further reveals who will bring them about for God's people.

They will come about through a righteous king on the throne of David. **“Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment,”** we hear the prophet say in verse 1. Who is this king?

Initially, it may have been King Hezekiah, the 13th king of Judah. He was a great improvement over his wicked father, King Ahaz, and did bring about a number of positive reforms during his reign. Blessings followed, not the least being that the Assyrian armies who had laid waste the northern kingdom of Israel were turned back and did not get as far as Jerusalem. For a span of time, God's people did dwell in safety.

But, the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy lay some 700 year in the future with the coming of another king, King Jesus. He is the righteous King *par excellence* who causes God's people to live in peace and safety, not just for a few years, but for eternity.

The blessing of secure dwelling places will come at His Second Coming in what is sometimes called the "messianic age".

But, there are a number of places in the New Testament which suggest we don't have to wait until then.

I thinking, for example, of John 14, a chapter often read out at funerals. Here Jesus says: "**In my Father's house are many mansions** [dwelling places in the RSV]."

More secure dwellings than those built by God Himself, I dare say, cannot be found.

Paul lays before us a similar vision in 2 Corinthians 5:1 where he writes:

"If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

The tabernacle or tent of which he is speaking is our present body. Because we are 'frail children of dust' these dwellings often let us down and go away, but not so with dwellings in God's Space, heaven.

Some of you have lost friends and loved ones this past year. Christmas will be different this year.

Let this thought sustain you: Your loved one if he was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is in one of those safe dwellings prepared by God Himself. Your loved one will celebrate the birth of the new-born King alongside you, but on another shore and in a greater light.

So, we don't have to worry about those who have gone before. They are in God's hands and in God's home. And one day, by God's grace, we shall occupy one of these *mansions* as well.

That remains me: I know a lady who is not sure she wants one of those ‘mansions’. Too many bathrooms to clean, she says. Well, we shall have to wait and see about that! ///

Back to Isaiah’s word in today’s passage

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The full realization of the prophet’s vision may lie ahead, either at our Lord’s Second Coming or in heaven, but I want to suggest that anticipations of those safe dwellings of which he speaks can be found now. Yes, in our own neighborhood, indeed in our own home.

“Happy are the people, whose God is the LORD,” says the Psalmist. His words are true. The home where God’s precepts are known and followed, where the Bible is an open book, where people pray, say thank you, forgive and love unselfishly, is a happy place.

It’s not the number of gifts under the Christmas tree, what’s parked in the garage, how many electronic toys you have, which makes a house a happy place, a real home . . . it’s God’s presence. And I might add, a cat or dog thrown into the mix doesn’t hurt!

Can you think of such a home? It might be one you remember from childhood. A home where there is warmth, peace, joy and love, a place which draws you, makes you want to go there.

I want to suggest that such homes are more than a blessing to those who occupy them. They also stand as a witness to those who look in from the outside. They are beacons of light in a dark world.

Such homes attract interest, cause people to ask, what do those people have that I don’t? They may well serve as a door to evangelism. By all means, use whatever opportunities you are given.

Yours can be such a home. With God all things are possible. Don’t leave the home of your dreams on the front of a Christmas card. Strive with God’s help to make your home a place “where the love light gleams”, a place of warmth and cheer. In short, a *real* Christmas home. I close with a verse which turns this aspiration into prayer:

God give us Christian homes!
Homes where the Bible is loved and taught,
Homes where the Master's will is sought,
Homes crowned with beauty Your love
 has wrought;
God give us Christian homes;
God give us Christian homes! (B.B. McKinney)

And so, let us pray and work.