



## I'll Be Home For Christmas

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

### Zephaniah 3:20

*"At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you together; yea, I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord.*

Packed away with all the Christmas decorations is one of Janet's music boxes. It's one of those glass spheres filled with water and fake snow. Inside that snow globe sits a little house. If I pick it up and shake it, that little house will be in the middle of a winter snow storm. As that snow swirls around, I can twist the key on the bottom and hear the music box play "I'll be home for Christmas ... if only in my dreams."

This is the time of year when I think back and remember my old homes, and I want to go back.

But it is only in my dreams that I can go home to those three houses I once knew.

I dream of that old white house that stood on the top of the hill on Lancaster Street. I can close my eyes and be there once again. I remember being awakened every Christmas morning by my sister. She would run into my room while it was still dark, usually around five o'clock. She would yell at me, "Jerry, get up! It's Christmas." My sister and I always had to stand there at the top of the stairs shivering as we anxiously waited for our parents to get the tree lights turned on and the old home movie camera warmed up; then, when they finally called to us, we would rush down the stairs to dig into the pile of toys and presents under the tree.

I remember a family tradition that happened almost every year when the family would sit down at the dinner table. After eating a big holiday meal, Dad would announce that he had eaten so much that he had to unbutton his pants so he could eat one more helping of turkey or pecan pie. When he was

finished, he would push his chair away from the table, stand up and walk away, letting his pants fall down while all the rest of us laughed until we cried.

And best of all, I remember the quiet moments that followed, snuggling up close to my mother on the couch, feeling her arms wrap around me. We would all sit there in the quiet, being happy and contented, feeling loved and safe.

Yes, this time of year when I want to come home.

I dream of a second home, a yellow split level on Gaylord Road in far off Virginia. I picture that red headed woman passing around her Christmas cookies and Virginia Ham biscuits. There, standing in the corner of the family room, would be the sorriest, ugliest, most pitiful looking Christmas tree I had ever seen. The man who placed it there would puff on his cigar as he admired his purchase and say, "No one should ever pay more than five dollars for a Christmas tree!"

It was a Charlie Brown kind of Christmas tree. It didn't get there by accident. The man who bought it had to search the Christmas tree lot until he found the one tree that no body else would ever buy. He would take a look at that pitiful specimen and shake his head. He figured it was the right one. To that tree which nobody else would have, he gave a gift. He gave it the gift of his home for Christmas.

And I can see again that younger red headed girl who brought me there, who gave me the gift of that family for life, who made that house my home, too.

I dream of that green house on Evans Street. I can see my own little children, filled with excitement and smiles, running down the stairs, searching through the gifts to find the one that made them say, "It's just what I wanted."

The memories flash through my mind, the happy moments, the tender moments, the loving moments - all tied to the places and the people who lived there.

Janet's music box plays, "I'll be home for Christmas," and all I can do is listen to that song, close my eyes, and dream of those homes.

Years have passed. I can not return to those houses. They have all been sold. Other people live there now. Other people are making memories there now. Other people are finding love there now.

I can't go back, but there's something about Christmas that makes me remember, and calls to my heart - "come home."

How about you? Do you know what I mean?

Christmas calls me to come home. I remember, and I dream of home. It's a sentimental journey I can only make in my heart. Even if I could, I don't have to travel to Ohio and Lancaster Street, or to Virginia and Gaylord Road, or even over to Evans Street here in North Tonawanda. I don't have to go to those particular houses to come home.

Christmas calls me to come home - but it isn't tied to one place in time. It isn't restricted to family and friends, some of whom may have died or left. It doesn't require only one set of memories. It's a different homeward journey I need to make. I think you need to make it, too.

Back in the 1960's a mother received a letter from her son who was in the Army in Viet Nam. "You know, Mom," the young soldier wrote, "I've got a feeling that I'm going to come home all right. I don't know why, but I feel that God is going to take care of that for me. And when I do get home, what I want most is that night after we've finished dinner - that we can stay right there at the table - and we can just sit there and look at each other - and realize that for a little while nothing else matters in the world except that we're together. That's all I want this Christmas."

Christmas calls you to come home. Don't you want to come home to a place where you're loved and wanted? Don't you want to come home to a place that's safe and secure? Don't you want to come home to a place where the only thing that matters is that you're all together?

Christmas has always called the believer to come home. It's no coincidence, remember that first Christmas started with a young family making a long journey home.

Remember? A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. So Joseph with his betrothed, Mary - who was great with child - went back to his home town. Back to Bethlehem they went, and while they were there, the first Christmas happened.

Christmas calls us all to come home. Some of us are lucky. Some of us will have the privilege of going back to the home we've always known this Christmas. Some others of us will be lucky in a different way - we will have Christmas come to our homes. Some others of us will make a home where we are, and share our family love and friendships long-distance.

Just like a carrier pigeon, most of us have an instinct that draws us back home in some way or fashion this time every year. And to whatever degree we find ourselves at home, we will be truly blessed.

But do not be naive enough to think that this will happen to everybody. Because for some of us, we just won't be able to be at home this Christmas, no matter where we are or who we are with.

Today's scripture lesson from the Old Testament speaks to our longing. The Hebrew people had been rounded up and taken as prisoners to a foreign land. They found themselves sitting down by the river that ran through Babylon, and they dreamed of home - a home they could not return to.

They remembered the songs they used to sing. They remembered the city streets they used to walk. They remembered the neighborhoods in which they used to live. They remembered the synagogue where they used to worship. They remembered, and they felt a longing to go back home. But they could not go; so, they cried to God for help.

Here in this scripture passage, their God answered their emptiness and their prayers. "I hear your longing," He said. "I understand your need," He said. "Never doubt it," He said, "the day will come when I will gather you together and bring you home."

"I will bring you home," He said, "where you will be with your loved ones."

This is the promise God made to His people thousands of years ago. It's the same promise God makes to you, today.

How will He do it? How will He bring you home? How can you get home for Christmas? How can you get home if you're stuck in California, or stationed in Iraq? How can you get home if home is across the ocean in Korea? How can you get home if somebody else lives in your home today? How can you get home if the person you want to be with has died? How can you get home if the relationship you want has been broken? How can you get home if time or distance or expense makes that trip impossible?

How can you sing of happiness and joy this Christmas if you can't go home?

How can you hear the Christmas bells ringing if you are a captive in a foreign land, if you are a prisoner to anger, if you are chained up by resentments, if you are burdened down with grief?

How can you appreciate the beauty of the season if your heart is full of sorrows, if there's an emptiness inside that can't be filled, if you are lonely?

How can you welcome the baby Jesus into your life if you don't feel loved?

How can you go home if you don't even know where home is any more?

I have read that out in the Pacific Northwest, the salmon out in the ocean feel a call. Something tells them, "it's time to go home." Several hundred miles out in the ocean, when the appointed time comes, some instinct bred deep in their memories calls them to make that journey home.

Somehow every individual fish knows which shore to head for. It knows which river to enter. It knows which tributary to take. It knows which stream to swim. Somehow, every year, every fish finds its way home. It has to swim against the current. It has to jump up the falling waters. It has to fight every inch of the way. But, it's worth it. Every fish finds its way home.

Until several years ago, when the volcano Mt. St. Helen's erupted. When that happened, the rivers of the Northwest were filled with debris. Some of the smaller rivers, streams and inlets disappeared entirely.

What happened that year to the salmon who couldn't get home? What happened to the ones whose homes had disappeared? They tried to go back, but when they couldn't go back; do you know what they did?

They went somewhere else. When they couldn't find the home they were looking for, they made a home where they were.

Those lucky salmon. They knew how to be happy with the home they got when they couldn't get back to the home they remembered.

Maybe there's a lesson there for all of us. Maybe we need to learn to be happy with the blessings we've got today. Maybe we need to be more like the salmon. Instead of longing for some mis-remembered yesterday, maybe we need to look around at the life we have, at the people we know, at the opportunities of today - and feel blessed!

Maybe that's the Lord God's message to you this Christmas season. When you can't go back home to the home you remember, be at home wherever you are. When you can't be with the people you love, learn to love *better* the people you have.

Maybe you can't get back home. Maybe the people and the places and the emotions you long to recapture are just plain gone. Perhaps you need to learn how to come home through faith in Jesus Christ.

A television star told of her experience in coming home. "I had my own television specials," she said, "I had become a big success. So I built a house on top of a mountain. I thought I was happy, but I never felt at home. One day it hit me, and I understood what I had been lacking. I knelt down in my big empty house up there on the mountain, and I prayed to God. I was crying so hard my body shook. Then suddenly, I felt a warm light around me. I said, 'Please God, I want to come home. Can I just come home?' My mom and my

dad had taken me to Sunday School and had taught me about God, but I didn't understand until then that you have to make the journey home to him all by yourself. When I turned back to God, I finally started to feel at home."

There is no better time to make that journey for yourself than at Christmas time! Don't you want to go home - to feel the love and acceptance, the forgiveness and the welcome, the tenderness and the gentleness? Don't you want to go home - to see the beauty of the lights, to smell the delightful aroma of a cheery kitchen, to feel the warmth from the glow across the hearth?

Don't you want to come home to the faith that Jesus Christ loves you just the way you are, to understand that you can be better than you are, to realize that you can love and accept, forgive and renew the lives of the people you meet?

Make that journey! Come home this Christmas - not in your dreams - but come home this Christmas in your heart and in your soul.