



# "Homecoming"

## A Christmas Letter to the Diocese from Bishop Reed

Christmastide 2020

*"Prepare for mirth, for mirth becomes a feast."  
-Shakespeare, in Pericles, Prince of Tyre*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Feliz Navidad! I wish you peace at Christmas, the deep welling-up of the peace of Christ.

After months of being quasi-confined, semi-isolated, and practically tethered to our houses, it's a wonder that this season still evokes in us a familiar longing for home. In reflective moments, we may realize that this longing is less about missing a place and much more about longing for people, about missing relationships. And this longing seems less about returning to simpler times, whether real or imagined, and more about moving toward a fullness and completeness – toward an abiding joy and delight.

Christmas is a homecoming. When "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), God chose irreversibly to make his home among us through the birth of his only Son Jesus Christ. Christmas is our homecoming too, for the "good news of a great joy which will come to all people" (Luke 2:10) is that our way home passes through a manger in Bethlehem, lit by the star. Love awaits us, and, indeed, we should prepare expectantly for mirth.

Few creatures are more vulnerable than a newborn baby. At the same time, few events in life are more disruptive to our settled ways and assumptions than the arrival of a child. Such is the love embodied in Jesus. He "empties himself" (Philippians 2:7), making himself at home with us, so that he might deliver us from sin and death. While God comes to us in this tiny-fingered fragility, at the same time his Incarnation sets loose the awesome disruptive and creative power of God's love to reconcile us and bring us home to him, to one another, and to our truest selves.

Faced with this beautiful gift, what can we do, but join God in his delighted laughter? And so, we "repeat the sounding joy," and our mirthful response rolls outward from Christmas Day and away from the manger, like the sunrise bringing new light each day. We discover we can begin to see everything – and every one – in the light of his birth.

How can we get closer to this mystery, except by worship and prayer, stories and songs, and the sharing of our lives, not just at Christmas, but all our days?

Part of our longing now is surely to be with others and to sing – or listen to others sing – ancient and new songs celebrating Jesus' birth. The Light shines on, and the angels sing out, intruding into the ordinary, whether we hear them in Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus or "Joy to the World," in Vince Guaraldi's jazzy music for "A Charlie Brown Christmas," or even Aimee Mann and 'Til Tuesday singing, "Coming up close/ Everything sounds like, 'Welcome home,'/ Come home." (Coming Up Close, 1986)





The Light that has come into the world, which the darkness will never overcome, illumines all things, allowing us to come closer and see more clearly the wonders of his love.

You don't need me to point out how different this year's Christmas observance will be. We know in our hearts and our bones what has been lost, delayed, reduced, or set aside entirely during the 2020 holiday season. Still, ready or not, the Holy Day comes. Just so. For our Lord comes, and Christmas happens, in joyful disregard of our own readiness. The Child comes and makes his home with us.

For years, I have told a story and read a letter to help congregations, and myself, remember that Christmas is a gift from outside ourselves that is not dependent on our circumstances. This year seems to be an especially poignant moment to do so again.

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in a prison cell a week before Christmas in 1943, writing a letter to his parents. As a leader of the German Confessing Church, he had been convicted of actively resisting Nazism and plotting to assassinate Hitler, then imprisoned to await execution.

*He wrote: "Of course you can't help thinking of my being in prison over Christmas, and it is bound to throw a shadow over the few hours of happiness which still await you in these times. ...For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. ...That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt look very different to the eyes of God from what they do to man; that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor; that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – these are things which a prisoner can understand better than anyone else.*

*For the prisoner the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives the prisoner a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance. On Christmas Eve I shall be thinking of you all very much, and I want you to believe that I too shall have a few hours of real joy and that I am not allowing my troubles to get the better of me.*

*...It will certainly be a quiet Christmas for everybody, and the children will look back on it for long afterwards. But for the first time, perhaps, many will learn the true meaning of Christmas."*

The hardships, inconveniences, and grief we are experiencing during the pandemic are very real. As Christians, we are called to keep these realities in their proper context, so that we don't minimize the suffering of so many of our neighbors at home and around the world, nor lose sight of the grace and power we have received to love others with the same love revealed in the birth of Jesus. May our present longing lead us to a deepened compassion for those in great need all around us, that will last long after this season has ended.

Ready or not, Christmas comes and unto us a Child is born. In the fullness of time, the time has come for us to make our way home. Prepare for mirth, and let us keep the feast.

Love in Christ,

+David Reed

Bishop of West Texas

