

Christmas 2018

The Rev. Emily Richards

*Love Welcomes*

In the name of the Love that names us, claims us and makes us whole. *Amen.*

One of my favorite contemporary holiday movies is *Love Actually* which tells the story of nine interconnected relationships in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The film is bookended with scenes at Heathrow Airport. As images of family and friends embracing one another with great delight fill the screen you hear the voice of Hugh Grant's character, the Prime Minister of Great Britain say, "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends...If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around."

Christmas is a season for homecomings. Underpinning our traditions, both secular and sacred, is a deep longing to know we have been welcomed home. It's that feeling evoked in *Love Actually* when you walk through the arrivals gate and right on the other side is someone eagerly awaiting to scoop you up as a parent does with their child. Or when you open the door and are enveloped with the sounds and smells of the holiday and there's a place at the table set just for you. It is a time to be reminded that we belong, that there is actually a place for us, a place in the family, a place in the church, a place set for you and me in God's joyous, raucous, undignified economy of love. The miracle of the Incarnation is that the Almighty Creator of all chose to make a home among us so that we could find our true home. In the prologue of John's Gospel, he writes that "the Word was God and the Word became flesh and lived among us." As one modern translator describes, "God pitched a tent and moved into the neighborhood."

What is even more scandalous about God's decision to take on our flesh is that our Creator chose to do so experiencing the same sense of rejection we have when we are told that we do not have a place to call home. There was no fanfare when God moved into the neighborhood. No tweet announcing His arrival. In fact, if anyone had read it in on Facebook, they might have considered it fake news. I've always wondered if Mary and Joseph ever felt at home in their world. After all, they were peasants living in a small, rural village within an occupied land. Their leaders didn't speak their language or pray to their God. And on royal decree they were compelled to leave the only place they had called home to travel on foot and on donkey almost a hundred miles to another small village in which they found no lodging for themselves and their child, about to be born.

It was barn animals who welcomed the Son of God into our world. And it was lowly shepherds, the itinerant farmers of the first century who were the first eyewitnesses of this miracle. "Into this world, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited," writes Thomas Merton. "But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected by power, because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world."

There are over sixty-eight million refugees, asylum seekers & internally displaced people all over the globe according to The Episcopal Migration Ministries. Twenty-five million of them have fled into another country, into conditions that are often not much better than the horrors they escaped. And six million are Syrians, many of whom traveled hundreds of miles in the darkness of night like Mary and Joseph. Then, on overcrowded boats, with almost nothing but life vests they make their way to the shores of Greece in search for a new life. Becca Stevens, founder of Thistle Farms, a social justice enterprise which brings healing and hope to women survivors of trauma visited some of these refugees at a camp in Greece. After hearing their stories, she initiated a new partnership between them and members of the Thistle Farms' community. Together, they are now weaving welcome mats that include the fabric from the life vests they and their children wore as they fled their homeland. *Love Welcomes* is the name of this partnership, an enterprise committed to helping women transform their pain and loss into hope for a better future. On our altar sits one of these mats, a tangible reminder

for all of us wanderers that Love welcomes. Love came down at Christmas. Love enfleshed as a tiny, helpless child. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present. With those who feel afraid, lost, alone and unworthy, Christ is present. With those who are longing for a place to belong, Christ is present. Love is present.

I was recently sent a video of my five-year-old nephew playing Joseph in his school's pageant. He arrives at the inn with sweet, little Mary by his side and a whole throng of unruly angels behind them. He knocks loudly at the door. It opens with an astonished innkeeper and guests on the other side. "Do you have room for us?" my nephew says with a bold urgency in his young voice. "We have no place for you," the innkeeper responds. And then my nephew says, "Well, okay. Do you want to come with us so that we can find a place together?" Whether this was extemporaneous acting on the part of my nephew or planned by his teachers, his words embody the heart of the Christmas message. Even when we do not make room for God in our world, even when we do not make room for God's beloved children, God finds a way to make room among us and make room for all of us. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it so well, "In our hearts we sense there is a place where we belong. Somehow, we got separated from it a long time ago; and we miss it. We sense that that place misses us, too, and because we cannot find our way there, the place comes to us, and it turns out not to be a place at all. It turns out to be a person. Emmanuel, the one who came to be with us forever."

Christmas is indeed a season for homecomings; a time to celebrate that we have a home through the miraculous gift of God's Son. It is also a time to recommit ourselves to the work of Christ's incarnation by making more room at our tables, in our communities and in our nation, expanding our fearful hearts and looking beyond our limited vision to see that love actually is everywhere penetrating even the gloomiest corners of our lives and our world. For Love heals. Love gives hope. And Love welcomes. Merry Christmas, beloved people of God. *Amen.*