

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Flight and a Return Home”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

First Sunday after Christmas (Year A)

December 29, 2013

Isaiah 63:7–9; Colossians 3:12–17; Matthew 2:13–23

Gracious God, we thank you for Christ Jesus, your Son, the Light of the world. The lights on our Christmas trees, the lights in our windows, the lights on our lawn, and on our trees outside remind us that Your Son, the Light of the world, has broken through the darkness and offered us all hope, light, and life. For that, we are grateful. Help us to hear Your Word. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Just a few days ago, we culminated the whole Advent season with the wonderful celebration of Christmas on the Eve of Christmas. All through Advent, we prepared and anticipated that great moment when we gathered as a family of faith to celebrate Christ among us, born to us, God become flesh. During the course of the days following Christmas—this is the first Sunday after Christmas, then we celebrate Epiphany and even up to the day of the Baptism of the Lord—the church encourages us to reflect on the meaning of this season. It’s not finished yet. We have the opportunity to explore, to renew, to deepen our appreciation, our understanding of the meaning of God among us, of God taking on our flesh and its implications for us in carrying out the mission entrusted to us as the body of that Christ in the world in which we live.

It is a good time as well during the course of these days to reflect on the meaning of home where we gather together with family. I remember that famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy clicks her glittering red shoes and says, “There’s

no place like home!” She had been ripped away from her home in Kansas and taken off to the Land of Oz, and through her adventures there, she was always searching for a return home. There’s no place like home.

But in the case of Joseph, he had not yet settled into a home after the birth of his son. He was constantly pushed to one place or another before he landed back in Galilee to establish and create a safe and secure place that he could call home for his wife and child. We’re listening to and continuing the story of Jesus in the infancy narrative of Matthew through the person of Joseph as the one who leads us to understand more fully the meaning and the uniqueness of this child that the wise men just recently had come to pay homage with their gifts. Joseph was warned in a dream, a message from God, to flee to Egypt because he knew that the child was in danger, and so he did. And he remained there until another dream told him that it was time to return back to Israel, but not to the place where he expected to go because he was warned again that Archelaus was there. He was afraid to go back to Bethlehem. So he landed in the district of Galilee, and there, he made his home in a town called Nazareth, the town that became the place for this child to grow up in wisdom and in truth and in grace.

This time of the year is a chance for us to reflect about family and home and its importance in our lives. Family has always been a place where the very best of the human condition can come alive and be present to us. Just think of those values that we hold dear, affection, life itself, encouragement, hope, support. And yet at the same time, I think we’re all well aware that family is a place where a lot of discontent and harm can occur. There are a lot of challenges that many families face, some very serious where hurt is the watchword: abuse, neglect, even indifference.

The only way possible for us to hold together the mystery of family is because of the healing power and grace of the living God. Let’s reflect for a moment on the ways in which that grace is recognized in our lives by three examples: **the need for forgiveness, the need for a spirit of adventure, and the reality of love as intentional and deliberate.**

Forgiveness. We inevitably hurt each other. Life cannot go forward without forgiveness, especially for those closest to us. I think of the rather famous story of the wooden bowl that you probably have heard often. There are many different versions of it. Let me try to capture it for you. The one I liked is the Oriental version where this young couple in the ancient Orient was just married. The husband takes his wife into his home. While she was getting ready for dinner, she notices her father-in-law is in the corner eating rice out of a wooden bowl. She turns to her new husband and says, “Husband, why is it that your father eats rice out of a wooden bowl in a corner?” He looks at her with a stern gaze and says, “He wronged me. He receives only what he deserves.” She knew not to ask again.

Later that night, she turns to the father-in-law in the corner, and she says, “Break the bowl.” He says, “If I break the bowl, I will have nothing to eat.” “Break the bowl.” The next morning, the husband turns and sees that the father has a broken bowl in the corner of the room, and he says, “Old man, you shouldn’t have done that.” And the wife says to him, “Yes, he should not have done that because I was saving that bowl for *you* for when you grow old, and they feed *you* from it.”

We can’t go through life without compassion. We can’t survive without forgiveness. That is a gift of grace that erupts out of our lives and makes it possible for us to let go of the hurts, pains, and the suffering and to allow the healing grace of God to make possible peace in our lives and in our relationships.

Spirit of Adventure. Sarah Finbow and I were teaching the Middle School Sunday School class some weeks ago. In an aside in the course of the lesson, Sarah mentioned something about the importance and the power of symbols. We started a discussion on symbolism. The students were struggling to come up with a symbol that would capture a sense of what we were trying to convey, and I mentioned the word “balloons.” I’ve always found balloons to be a great symbol in cinema, in literature, and in life because it really is a potent symbol of childhood innocence and joy that sometimes very quickly can vanish with a burst or with a “let go and off it flies and floats to the sky.” As soon as I mentioned balloons, they jumped on it. They reminded me of the movie *The Red Balloon* (1956). There was a little boy in Paris who followed a sentient, mute, red balloon around the city. Then they mentioned my beloved movie of all time, *Up* (2009). It’s spectacular, and it’s a

story of love between Ellie and Carl. He was a retired balloon vendor, and balloons play an important role in the course of the story. The love story is what captured me the most because she began the relationship with him as a child, and they grew into marriage around the notion of adventure. She had a book called *My Adventure Book*, and throughout the course of their early days, she had all the ways in which she was fantasizing about one adventure after another. She had in the book the title “The Stuff I’m Going to Do,” and there were blank pages after it. It wasn’t until much later, as the story unfolds, that he realized that after she handed the book back to him at her death, there were actually continuing photos and remembrances. They always wanted to go to Paradise Falls, but life kept getting in the way. They had to keep breaking into their savings account to fix the roof, fix the car, pay for medical bills—they never got around to making the big adventure to Paradise Falls. It wasn’t until later in their relationship, after she had died, that he realized the book, the pages that followed ended up being simply their wedding day, their walk in the park, their sitting in their home reading together, that he began to realize that their ordinary, everyday relationship was the heart of their common adventure, and she encouraged him in that book in the end to take on a new adventure. For those who have seen the film, there ended up being a relationship again with little Russell, who lost his father, and he became a new man with a new adventure, bringing meaning to this child’s life. Little Russell says, “That might sound boring, but I think the boring stuff is the stuff I remember the most.”

The real adventure in our lives is the relationships we have with each other, and that movie helps us wake up to that truth.

Recognition that Love Is Intentional and Deliberate. This flows from both the themes of forgiveness and the theme of a spirit of adventure that makes up our lives, even in ordinary, everyday ways. Too often, we live under the illusion that love is something that happens. I guess we watch too many romantic comedies. Love is a decision. Love is a choice. I encourage you these days to embrace that choice of love that makes up your lives with your spouses, your children, your friends, your family, and the community in which we live and have our being.

Love is a commitment that is deliberate and intentional. During the course of these days after the Christmas season, I invite you with your families to reflect on the

meaning of this season, to recognize that we are, in so many ways, the embodiment of God among us himself. God is there in your ordinary everyday lives, and without forgiveness, without a renewed spirit of adventure, and a recognition that love is intentional and deliberate, you will lose a real sense of what this season means.

I also invite you to open your minds and your hearts to those who need to be with us here: those who are hurting, those who are homeless, those who are poor, those who are lonely. Our family at the church is much larger, and our commitment is much greater when we open our hearts and our church doors in our community to be a healing presence of God among us.

We are about to begin a new year, and it's always an opportunity for new beginnings, new resolutions, and a new sense of direction and hope. We are a hope-filled people. This season offers us that opportunity to affirm that Christ is our light in the darkness. The darkness is real from 9/11 to Newtown, and we know how bleak and bewildering this world can be. But there is one reason, and one reason alone, that makes it possible for us to be a hope-filled people, and that reason is this: the Word was made flesh and made **His home** among us.