

# CHRISTMAS NOSTALGIA

## Christmas Eve Meditation

### December 24, 2020

I'd like to read another text; one not traditionally read during Advent or Christmas. Hebrews 11: 13-16 --  
*"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."*

*"The sun is shining, the grass is green, the orange and the palm trees sway. There's never been such a day in Beverly Hills, LA. But its December 24, and I'm longing to be up north."*

Who remembers the next line?

*"I'm dreaming of a White Christmas, just like the ones I used to know; where the treetops glisten, and children listen, to hear sleigh bells in the snow. I'm dreaming of a White Christmas, with every Christmas card I write. May your days be merry and bright, and may all your Christmases be white."*

Christmas is a time of nostalgia. It may be the best day, the grandest day, in the history of Beverly Hills, LA; but its December 24 and Irving Berlin and Bing Crosby and thousands of war-weary American troops in the South Pacific and across the European theatre want to get ... home. Crosby's nephew, Howard Crosby, wrote: *"I once asked Uncle Bing about the most difficult thing he ever had to do during his entertainment career... He said in December 1944, he was in a USO show with Bob Hope and the Andrews Sisters. They did an outdoor show in northern France... he had to stand there and sing 'White Christmas' with 100,000 G.I.s in tears without breaking down himself. Of course, a lot of those boys were killed in the Battle of the Bulge a few days later."*<sup>1</sup>

*(I checked with my sisters-in-law, but no one knew for sure .... my wife's late uncle Virgil may have been among that crowd, he was KIA January 1, 1944 in northern France and is buried in an American military cemetery there n St. Avold, France)*

There's another Christmas standard written by Mel Tormé simply called, *"The Christmas Song."* He wrote that song in July, in the midst of a heat wave in the San Fernando Valley just northeast of Los Angeles. It was so hot outside, and all he wanted to think about were "chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose, tiny tots with their eyes all aglow, and folks dressed up like Eskimos." *(The song was made popular by Nat King Cole)* Other nostalgic songs: Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Matthis, the Carpenters, Kelly Clarkson all hit the top of the charts with "I'll Be Home for Christmas (if Only in My Dreams)," There's Elvis Presley's "It'll Be a Blue Christmas Without You."

Even when the song isn't explicitly nostalgic, the nostalgia is always implicit, isn't it? All the Christmas carols push our nostalgic buttons, and as we hear them or sing them, we remember ... home. Nostalgia is a kind of homesickness. Maybe home is a particular place, or a time, or a person. The power of nostalgia is that, on the one hand, it reminds us of home, and how sweet it is, and on the other hand it may remind us that we are not there, and how painful that can be *(except maybe this year, when we may be a bit sick of staying at home! But we still long and ache for a time, a place, when things were normal).*

Nostalgia has a bittersweet double edge to it. In fact, this double edge is woven into the very structure of the word. Nostalgia comes from two Greek words: "Nostos," which means "a return." "Algia," which means "a pain." It is an aching pain to go back ... back to a time, a place, or a person. Maybe that explains why there is so much tension in the Christmas season, a tension that goes deeper than the schedules we keep and the deadlines, the frantic celebrations, the harassed holiday crowds ... lying beneath all the hullabaloo of the season is a restlessness, a powerful longing and desire to be someplace we aren't. Sometimes nostalgic feelings can be a cause of great joy and anticipation; if things are good right now, if prospects are bright, the sweet pain of nostalgia enhances that feeling. But if things are dark, if things are not good, the sweet pain of remembering better times can worsen one's despondency and heighten one's sense of loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_Christmas\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Christmas_(song))

I've long believed there is a profound spiritual significance to our nostalgia, our homesickness. There are deep spiritual reasons for it. All of us here, regardless of our age, profession, place in life or level of church involvement ... we all have one thing in common: We are not home yet.

*(The following two paragraphs were edited out during the service due to time constraints; I include them here).*

*In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells the story of a young man who takes his part of the family inheritance, leaves the father's home, and goes off to a far country. We don't know where it is; it's just ... far. There he squanders everything on loose living, and he becomes increasingly desperate and despondent. The next thing he knows is that he is tending pigs, and he was so hungry he seriously considers eating the same slop the pigs ate. Then ... he remembers the lights of the Father's house. He grows homesick. Jesus says when the son came to his senses, he went home. For Jesus, coming to your senses and going home to the Father's house are one and the same. This nostalgic young man came to his senses, and he returned home to a waiting father who loved him.*

*Maybe someone here tonight has been off in a far country, spiritually ... perhaps you, too, have wandered away from your Father's home, you have wandered from the household of God; and like the prodigal son, you really don't like it out there. There is in you a homesickness for the "lights of your father's house" that maybe has drawn you here tonight. Perhaps the nostalgia engendered by this Christmas season has made you homesick; perhaps you, too, have come to your senses and wish to come home to God the Father. Know the point of the parable: Know that God the Father is waiting for you with open arms. Come home to Him this Christmas.*

Most of you this evening aren't like the prodigal son; you have been quietly and sincerely faithful over the years and yet you still feel the sweet pain of nostalgia and homesickness this season. You are like the ones written about in Hebrews ... *"Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."* This church is a fellowship of homesick folks, longing to be home with our Father in His house, in His heavenly home.<sup>2</sup> I believe that the nostalgia of the season, that aching to return to a better place, a happier time, has its roots in this deep, deep longing of every human heart ... we long to be home in our true home, our heavenly home, with our Creator and our Father.

I believe there is yet another reason that nostalgic feelings are heightened and magnified by this season. If you think of it, the central characters of the Christmas story were people who weren't home. Joseph and Mary had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census. The shepherds were away from home working in the fields when the angels came. Even the angels had to leave their home in heaven. And eventually some foreign wise men came. The only thing these diverse characters have in common is that none of them was home when they saw the Christmas miracle.

Well, tonight we have come to bow before the One who traveled the farthest. He left His heavenly home above ... his eternal, peaceful, perfect home. He took on human flesh and entered into this physical, tumultuous world of sin and pain and dirt. This Prince of Peace, this Mighty God, this Wonderful Counselor lay helplessly kicking and crying on a pile of straw in a feeding trough. I believe that homesick, nostalgic longing is heightened and magnified during the Christmas season because God gives to us a small taste of the immense longing and homesickness His Son must have felt. Throughout His earthly life He experienced the pain and disappointment of being misunderstood, of being harassed and unjustly accused, of being betrayed, of being beaten and brutally killed. From His birth onward, how Jesus must have felt the sweet pain of nostalgia ... how He must have longed to return home.

Why did He leave in the first place? Well, in a nutshell, He left His home above to make it possible for us to return home with Him ... He came to take all of us home to our Father's house. That, I believe, is the deepest root of the nostalgia we experience this season. God gives us a just a taste of what Jesus must have felt; how He must have longed to be home. So tonight on Christmas Eve we have come to humbly give thanks and praise to the Father who stood at the threshold of heaven and bid farewell to the Son as He stepped across the stars into Bethlehem and into our lives ... so that one day we may return home with Him.

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<sup>2</sup> *Much of the preceding wording and insights were gleaned from a cassette recording of an excellent 1989 Christmas Eve sermon delivered by the Rev. Ben Patterson, then-senior pastor at the Presbyterian Church at New Providence, NJ, where I served as an interim associate 1989-1991.*