

Home Calling

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Christmas Eve, AD 2022
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

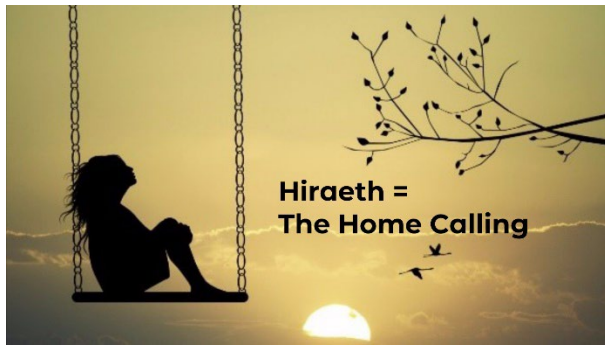


A young Scottish man left his coastland home and went to sea. He left quickly without family closure. His wanderlust made him heedless of how the ingratitude of such an abrupt departure might hurt his parents.

One cold winter night, his ship sailed north into a fierce and freezing headwind. The gale drove the boat perilously close to a rocky shore. As a pale sun rose, the ship was so near the headland that the young sailor could see the fire in the hearths sparkling through the windows of the few houses on the cliff side. Suddenly the lad recognized his own home! Then he recalled it was Christmas Day. His parents would be by the fire, talking of the son who was gone, “a shadow on the household” festivities. “A wicked fool” he felt himself to be as his very proximity to his childhood house heightened the feeling of his distance from his loved ones. Robert Louis Stevenson concludes his story-poem “Christmas at Sea,” by saying, “But all that I could think of, in the darkness and the cold/Was just that I was leaving home and my folks were growing old.”

Like no other time of year, Christmas stokes this home fire in us. The season ignites the hope, no matter how cynical we have become, that we may sit joyfully around a table with people we love and have it feel right. In spite of the disappointments, arguments, loneliness, and distorted dynamics, something in our heart stubbornly grasps the memories, no matter how fleeting, of feeling deeply known, accepted and safe. We distill these moments to the magical tastes of joyful love. Every Christmas we’re hoping to savor another drop. But it’s a daunting quest.

Since we forfeited the Garden of Eden, humans have been pierced with a home-longing. We leave home looking to find home. Yet it always seems to elude us.



It's never the same when we go back. We return at Christmas only to find that we don't fit at home like we remember we once did. We grow up to make new friends, new loves, yet our own new relationships still leave us with the ancient yearning. We renovate houses to make them feel more like homes, but

wake up in the night still wondering where we are.

The Welsh have a word for this. They call it *hiraeth* (*hee'-ryth*). It's the home calling. The powerful, unassuageable cry for home. The mystery of *hiraeth* is that we might feel this home calling even when we are sitting around our own hearth! *Hiraeth* evokes the stab the traveler feels upon at last arriving back: "Wait, this isn't it! There's yet a farther shore more home than even this cherished place. I'm longing for more." We can dream of it, but we don't know how to get there.

The *hiraeth*, the home-calling, in us points to a deeper spiritual hunger. Augustine said it so famously, "You have made us for yourself O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Our God loves us. He is merciful. But it can be a severe mercy. He desires us to be in communion with him. He simply will not let us be content in a life apart from his reality. He will never let us feel home in this world without him. We can strive to set it all up to be just how we want it, but the *hiraeth* will always cry out within us. For at the bottom of the well from which this home-calling rises, there is a yearning for the God who made us.



I'd like to suggest this Christmas that we allow this *hiraeth*, this home-calling, to draw us to Bethlehem. There we find that the Son of God left his home in heaven to make a home with us. We could not find our way home to God. We cannot make a home in ourselves. We need a home-maker. So Home came down to us. Jesus came across the great divide between God and humanity. True Home arrived in Bethlehem in order to gather *us* home. The God who is our heart's true homeland took up residence within the broken, ruined land of our lonely exile. The Son of God came to

get us in our yearning and lostness. He came to bring us back to communion with his Father and the Spirit.

G.K. Chesterton wrote a wonderful piece called “The House of Christmas.” It includes these lines:

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam,
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;

“Only where He was homeless/ are you and I at home.” Mary and Joseph were far from their earthly home when Jesus was born. Mary was not even allowed a room fit for humans in which she could give birth. She made her birthing room with the company of animals, and laid her precious baby in a feeding trough. Yet in this embrace between mother and child, the Son of God was making a home among humanity. And humanity was finding a home where our hearts could finally rest. In embracing the man who came down from heaven, who came from beyond us, we discover the home which has been calling to us, calling *through* us all our lives.

Christmas is the glorious paradox that God could take up human flesh and blood. Christmas reveals another paradox. When we devote our hearts to Christ Jesus above all else, all our earthly loves deepen. They get properly ordered. We savor them more, not less. But if we put an earthly love above our love for Jesus, then these earthly loves disappoints us. It falls short of fulfillment. Relationships even crack under the strain of trying to be too much to each other. We fear loving God above else, fear that he will take away our earthly loves. The opposite is true. When we love Jesus first, we love one another more.

Almost a decade ago, Rhonda and I began a quest to know God in Jesus Christ more truly, more deeply than ever before. We sought his healing and his truth. He changed us. There could be no turning back. In every hardship, we gave ourselves to him more intentionally. I could no longer pretend to be the hero of Rhonda’s story. She could no longer seek her first contentment in the family she raised and loved. We pressed into Jesus. And a curious thing happened. We started to love each more. Not less, but more. We grew to love our grown children more, not less, when we loved Jesus most of all. We savored friends more. We overflowed with love for you, our dear church. And our grandkids, well, we didn’t need any help loving them....



Here's Christmas news for you. The *hiraeth*, the cry for home in us has been placed inside our hearts by our loving Father. It is his Spirit who calls out within us. Calls us to find our heart's home in the Son of God who made his home with us. Home begins when we step into Mary's embrace of the

miraculous boy she held in her arms.

Chesterton concluded,
To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome...
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Coming to Christ in faith, we can taste home now. We get a drink that slakes our thirst. It's not Home yet. We're still on the journey, but we've caught sight of the lights of home shining in the darkness. It's not the feasting table yet, but we get a taste that answers our hunger, even as we await more. We get a connection to the company of those travelling home with us, a fellowship that connects soul to soul. A realization that we are not alone. We still pine for a full arrival, a complete communion. But by faith, we now know where the cry for home leads us. We know that we can join Mary's embrace of the infant God who came to save us. The more we love him, the more we know that Home is real and we will reach it. To the place where God was homeless, in Bethlehem, we find our home.

Prayer of Freeing Faith

Lord Jesus, on this holy night, we hear the home-calling in our hearts. We want to be safe, connected, seen and loved. We want to know we have a place. We confess that we have sought Home in barren places. We have wandered far, down rugged paths of self-assertion. We sought peace apart from you, and so we found only restlessness. We sought life apart from you, and so we found only death. Forgive us. We would return to our heart of hearts and find you there. We would return to you, the true Home-maker. You are as near as our next breath. Only our stubborn

sin keeps us from you. Oh, forgive us. We would enter our Home with you by taking you into the home of our bodies. We would come to the manger, your first home with us, to receive your body and blood, and so be taken into the everlasting Home that is you. Amen.