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AT HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

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As long as I have worked with associate pastors I always tell them to go home at Christmas if this is their desire and opportunity. Senior pastors preach on Christmas Eve and Easter. The rule has no written citation, but a rule it is. Hence I tell associate pastors, “if you want to go home at the holidays, go. There may come a day you cannot.”

I have never “gone home” for Christmas since 1989. But I have always been “at home”. When Kathy and I ventured from San Diego to Princeton in 1990, the first Christmas was rough. We were “alone” even though there were two kids and a cat with us. We were alone because there were no blintzes at John and Anne's, no black olives in a crystal tray at the Garrys, no poker games with my grandmother and aunts or champagne and coffeecake with Kathy's parents. This first Christmas was tough. We were alone.

Two things came quickly to us. The first was a new rule. On our holidays “alone” no one had to eat anything they did not want. We prepared a Christmas meal and our two young ones were neither cajoled nor directed to eat anything. There was a sense of being on “holiday” with this freedom, something like the ancient tradition of “misrule” when normal rules are suspended.

The second tradition coming quickly was a recognition: where before we had a family, now we had to become one. This was not a rejection of traditions or tribes, definitions or roles. Becoming a family was maturing, but mostly becoming a family was learning to trust we had each other, needed each other in ways we had not.

Through the years we have made some of our best memories during Advent. (Although to be very honest it was not until I became a pastor that the word Advent was ever spoken.) Maybe our first such memory was watching our young, first born climb our Charlie Brown tree and bring it down on himself. He did this once. We had a cat who did it too many times. There was the moment our daughter Zoe discovered the length and thus potential windfall of Hannakuh and asked if we could be Jewish. A deeply cherished memory was finding our youngest clad only in



Fred Garry and his father and grandmother around 1970

underwear running through the fellowship hall of the church during the Christmas Eve service. Long story.

Yet, the moment I cherish the most was the deep sense of being a family, the belonging together I came to appreciate when we ventured out. It wasn't better being “far from home,” it was a deep sense of being joined to the past and the present, we were in this together. It was as if life belonged to us and we to life. We were in this together even when apart. We had to venture far away to find how close we could become.

The soul needs to belong, to be a part, to have a place, to have a sense of home. This need is so poignant during Advent when we remember the babe born in the barn displaced far from home but yet in an ancestral home. The child announced by angels and sought by kings, yet, humble and other. Our confessions proclaim “we belong to God” yet somehow in Advent I feel a powerful peace knowing God belongs to us in Mary's child.

Perhaps this is the deep truth of Advent where we long to go home: somehow God came home to us. We belong to each other; we are in this together. As you prepare your heart for Christmas with decorations and trees and lights, wonder if perhaps you are preparing a welcome for God to come home to you. We belong together.