

Happy Thanksgiving 

Merry Christmas 

GARDNER

Holiday Newsletter

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Newsletter

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“Christmas is about providing a home for those who need it most.”

By: Rev. Dan Whitney

*“I’ll be home for Christmas, You can count on me.
Please have snow and mistletoe, And presents
under the tree. Christmas Eve will find me Where
the love light beams. I’ll be home for Christmas if
only in my dreams.”*

(by Kim Gannon, Walter Kent, Buck Ram)

The lyrics express a powerful sentiment, don’t they? The drive to return home for the holidays has a strong emotional attraction, doesn’t it? Or at least it does for many of us.

Many of us fondly remember holiday celebrations from a long ago time. We remember parents and traditions, gifts and the smell of particular foods. We remember the anticipation of Christmas Eve, and the dash to open gifts carefully arranged around a Christmas tree. Perhaps we remember siblings and friends from a less complicated time in our lives. There is a natural longing to return to these times and places.

That longing may arise simply because life has gotten so very complicated. With the passage of time comes brokenness and tragedy. Some of the people we once loved are only available to us through memory. Parents may be gone, siblings inconveniently leave us behind.



Perhaps the home I long to return to isn’t the home of my childhood, but the home I created with my spouse and my own young children. Even these homes, these sacred moments in time, do not last. The children marry and move away. The grandchildren do not live close by.

Sometimes the loss is not due to aging or geographical distance. Sometimes, we create the distance ourselves, or the distance is created by others, intentionally. The marriage didn’t survive. A child is estranged. We look back, painfully, and wonder what went wrong. We long for what we once had, wishing it could be free from the taint of the injuries that would follow.

For some of us, the old song doesn’t have any meaning at all. For these folks my heart breaks. Some don’t have a time or home to remember. Some have never known a father’s love or a mother’s warm embrace. Some

were scarred by the people who should have cherished them. There isn’t much of a reference point for the memories that so many of us share. Sooner or later, however, the stories of others begin to create a longing in them for what was missed, what was lost.

In 1943 the world was at war, and many thousands of American men and women in the service would be spending Christmas far from home. As a special gift to them and their families came this lovely, tender ballad, recorded by Bing Crosby. Just a year earlier, Bing had had a best-seller with Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas,” and his recording of this new song also passed the million-record mark in sales. On December 17, 1965, the Crosby recording became the first “request” that was broadcast into outer space. As astronauts James Lovell and Frank Borman were hurtling back to earth aboard Gemini 7 after their record 206 orbits, a NASA transmitter asked if there was any music they would especially like to hear. Their immediate reply? Bing’s “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.”

It is interesting to me that wealth seems to play so little a part in

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Happy 97th Birthday, Aunt Lois!

Aunt Lois turned 97 on November 6th. It's never too late to send a birthday card, (perhaps a phone call) even if it's a bit late.

Some of what is to follow may have been published in earlier editions of the newsletter, but in this letter dated October 2, 2001, Aunt Lois recalls some events from her childhood.

Aunt Lois alludes to the big Vermont Flood of 1927. She mentions that she and the family did not feel the effects quite as much as others because it seems the homestead was on higher ground. What is interesting, though, is that Aunt Lois is a survivor of the big flood of 1927 AND the Vermont flooding of May 2011 and the extreme residual flooding from Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011. Talk about being a true survivor! There is an article later in this issue that describes the big flood of 1927.

Let's get on with Lois' letter:

First, here are some snow stories. We never stayed at home because of snow storms. I can remember Papa hitching the horse to the sleigh and taking us to school when the snow was up to the horse's stomach. Maybe by lunch time the snow roller had come by and packed the snow down. The snow roller was a big thing, as I remember it. It was about twice as tall as a car, but it made wonderful sliding. We had a travis sled and it would hold five or six people. Blake Hill was closer to the road than it is now and had a sharp

corner down at the bottom and go a little ways up another hill. Even our teacher, Carrie Gray, used to slide



with us.

We couldn't afford skis, but we had sleds. I remember when the snow was just right (some snow and then it rained and froze). It made a crust we could walk on. I remember going in the field in front of our house way up to the corner where our fence met the neighbors and sliding down and across the road down to the meadow. We really couldn't do that very often, but it was a lot of fun.

We used to have tramps come along the road. I remember the first time we saw Wesley Hinton. We were afraid of him. One tramp wanted me to kiss him, so I did. But one of my brothers or sisters told Mama and she punished me by making me

stand in the closet for five minutes. I couldn't see why that was wrong.

Papa had hired a man to work for him who had just got out of jail and they had a disagreement about his pay. While Papa's back was turned, the hired man jumped on him and got him down on the floor and started to chew his ear. I couldn't have been more than four or five and I ran down to the house and said to Mama, "Man pigthing Papa."

Mama finally realized what I was saying. She was giving Clayton a bath and she wrapped him in a blanket and took a teakettle of hot water to the barn. I guess that worked, as he got off of Papa. I don't think he got any pay.

In the 1927 flood, we didn't realize there was a flood. We were high enough. It didn't affect us, but I remember going to Grandma's house in Lyndonville and we had to detour in East Burke as the river had changed its course and ran down the road.



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these memories of great Christmases. I've heard stories of Christmases celebrated during the Great Depression where extravagant gifts of “one apple or orange” were given. The size of the gift didn't lessen the joy. I read one story of a boy and his female cousins who decided to kidnap Santa Claus, since they were too poor to expect any gifts. After waiting in bed for a while, they climbed out the bedroom windows with the rope they planned to use to tie the old man up. They figured they could get the gifts that Santa might take to other kids. When they got outside, shivering and freezing, they could, through the windows, see their parents taking out gifts they had hidden in different places in the house, preparing them for the next morning. With some sadness, they understood the Santa Claus myth, but also learned how much their parents loved them. It's a fond memory for them, one that draws them.

As I consider my own heritage, I remember the first time that I wasn't at home with my own birth family on December 25th. Nancy Gardner Cove had attracted all of my attention, and for the very first time, I was celebrating Christmas morning in New York with Elinor and Dick and Chris and Nancy, rather than in Pennsylvania. It was a strange feeling.

Nancy and I knew life was changing. We were slowly separating from our families of origin, soon to embark on a new adventure of our own. This meant we would have to talk about how we would divide our time between our two families over the holidays. The traditions were different. The changes were not easy to embrace.

At about 10 o'clock that day, the phone rang in New York. It was my brother calling to ask what I had gotten for Christmas. I told him, I had no idea, since we hadn't gotten to the presents yet. He was incredulous! 10 o'clock and no idea about the presents? Their presents had been opened

hours ago. Breakfast had been eaten. I imagine some of the toys were already broken. Christmas was celebrated differently in Pennsylvania than in New York! In New York, it was stockings first, then breakfast. The presents were opened one at a time, (having attempted to guess the contents from the clues on top, and calculating the percentage of correct answers you had given), then assembled, tried out, and wrapping paper folded and saved. It took days.

Nancy and I had a wealth of traditions from which to choose when we married, enriched by the caring families that nurtured us as we grew. It is no wonder that we long for those days, those warm, wonderful Christmas lights and smells and memories.

It makes me wonder how we could have all gotten so far off the track. I guess if Christmas wasn't rooted to a specific story, it wouldn't matter at all. But it is so rooted. Christmas is the celebration of that time in history when the Son of God was born as a human babe in a middle-eastern town called Bethlehem. The Bible tells us that this happened because God loved (still does) us, and wanted us to know that he loves us and wanted us to know what he was like (Hebrews 1:2). And so, in order to show humans how to live, and to create a way for them to interact with God himself, God leaves his home and is born to a young Jewish couple, poor and barely established. (John 1:14)

All this time, I have been confusing “Christmas” with “memories of home.” It seems to me that Christmas should be more about “leaving home” than “returning to home.” Christmas is about the sacrifice of God, who leaves his place of comfort in order to give gifts to those who need them. It's not about going back, it is about moving forward.

Charles Wesley famously wrote, “He left His father's throne above, So free, so infinite His grace. Emptied Himself of all but love, And bled for

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Vermont's 1927 Flood

Vermont has had a long history of flooding. Of its approximately twenty major floods in the last two hundred years, the flood of November 3-4, 1927, was one of the most devastating (rivaled, and perhaps exceeded, by the floods in May 2011 in Central Vermont and the widespread damage from flooding related to Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011). A severe rainfall had swept across all of New England on that November weekend. But when the deluge hit Vermont, the state's soil had already become saturated and the streams were running full because of an unusually heavy precipitation in late summer and fall.

The rain began at 10 o'clock on the evening of November 2, and continued until 11 a.m., November 4. The heaviest rain came during the afternoon and evening of November 3, when more than seven inches fell in a six-hour period. It was on that evening that the flood reached its height. The downpour, which went almost immediately into the river systems scattered through the state's narrow and low valleys, was more than the water-

courses could handle. Brooks overflowed and rivers became torrents, carrying trees and logs in their wake. Rivers reached 13 feet or more above their normal depths. Dams, bridges, and embankments were swept away. Towns and villages located along the rushing streams were engulfed. Factories submerged, farm animals drowned, and homes and barns were destroyed. As the water gradually receded, it left behind a trail of eroded farm land; layers of silt, gravel, and debris; and disorganized towns. In Montpelier, which was especially hard hit, at least a foot of mud was left on floors of downtown stores.

The 1927 flood is generally considered the worst natural disaster in the state's history (in terms of loss of property, the 2011 floods are still being assessed). The list of dead totaled 84, with 55 lives lost in the Winooski River basin alone. In Bolton, 19 in one boarding house drowned when the Bolton Valley Dam broke. The loss to 23 manufacturing plants was \$2,812,500. In Montpelier, where only two stores carried flood insurance, the staggering loss totaled an average of \$400 for every man,

woman, and child in town. The State of Vermont estimated that a total of 1,258 bridges were destroyed or severely damaged, and that the total damage to the state's highways and bridges amounted to \$7,755,000. Total damage in the state resulting from the flood was estimated a \$35,000,000 (approximately \$439,000,000 in 2010 dollars—see MeasuringWorth.com).

In the days following the flood's abatement, Vermont was widely praised for its recovery efforts. President Calvin Coolidge, in particular, hailed the "indomitable spirit" of Vermonters who found strength within themselves and sought help from no one in meeting the adversity. However, Samuel B. Hand in 1987 and Deborah and Nicholas Clifford in 2007 have taken issue with the widely held impression that Vermont's efforts at recovery from the flood's destruction were spearheaded by individual acts of traditional Vermont-style self-help and ruggedly independent action without the aid of outside and especially federal assistance and funds. Hand and the Cliffords argue

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that the enormity of the task faced by communities in rebuilding town roads and bridges necessarily caused the most significant recovery efforts to be acts of the state government, financed by a combination of state and federal revenues. State-directed recovery efforts, they maintain and demonstrate, produced at least two effects of long-term importance: 1) the emphasis on state control of recovery activities and the de-emphasis of traditional local autonomy contributed impor-

tantly to the growth of the state bureaucracy; and 2) the reconstruction of Vermont's highway system with hard-surfaced roads greatly accelerated the arrival in Vermont of the age of the motor vehicle. The Cliffords argue, in addition, that the events of 1927 were a prelude to larger economic, social, and cultural changes of the 1930s and beyond.

—Gene Sessions



1927 Flood - St Johnsbury (left) and East Barnet, VT (right)

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Adam's helpless race.”

Christmas isn't about returning home, or remembering home. Christmas is about providing a home for those who need it most. Christmas isn't about dreaming to turn the clock back to simpler times. Christmas is about embracing opportunities to make a difference in lives that need to be touched by love.

Perhaps those warm memories many of us have are based on the fact that someone knew we needed a home, and provided one for us. Perhaps the best way we can celebrate Christmas, is to find ways to provide “home” for those who need it most. And

maybe, in the process of providing “home” for others, we will discover what we probably knew all along. It is the sacrifice of giving, whatever that may cost, that lies at the heart of all our best Christmas memories, and at the heart of the story itself. It just may be that if you really want to go home, you may have to embrace the discomfort of leaving it to get there.

May all the joys of Christmas be yours, and may your celebration reflect the spirit of the event itself, in ways that will enrich you and leave you the very best kinds of memories!