

**SERMON**  
**Christmas Eve 2018**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

*It feels like home to me. It feels like home to me*  
*It feels like I'm all the way back where I come from.*  
*It feels like home to me. It feels like home to me.*  
*Feels like I'm all the way back where I belong.*

(Lyrics by Chantal Kreviazuk; Sung by Glynis Moody)

I can always tell how long someone has been here at Epiphany Church by which door they come in. You see, it wasn't long ago, when the back door was the front door. The side door was in disrepair. And the accessibility door and ramp didn't exist at all. I've noticed that there are still a few of us who come in the back door thinking that it is the front door. Which, of course, it is, or was. Whatever door you use, for many people when they come into this Chapel—Epiphany is their “home away from home.” “It feels like home to me” and though it may seem small, it holds a multitude! It has been *like home* for hundreds if not thousands of people over the years. 100 years. If you came in the side door tonight, which is now the front door, you were reminded of the Chapel's first Christmas as you passed through a-sort-of No Man's Land of sand bags and barbed wire and saw a doughboy and his family saying “Good-bye” —perhaps right here in this Chapel that first night. Father and child. Mother and daughter. The child hangs on to her mother's skirt with a rather frightened look. Yet their togetherness is reassuring. And there, in that photographic replica, they stand united in that moment, forever.

All these Chapel entrances are portals—reminding us that “time and space are not conditions in which we live, they are modes in which we think.” Whew! Let me say that again! Einstein said it first—

*Time and space are not conditions in which we live,  
they are modes in which we think.*

And so, let's think a little differently tonight. It could be any year, any doorway or portal through which you travel. Whatever the time and space, whatever the year—tonight, “*It feels like home to me.*” It's Christmas Eve. The year Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And at the same time, it's 1918 and it's 2018. It happens, it *is happening*, here and now.

Here is one of the first pieces I wrote about Epiphany back in the day, when we were all about preserving and restoring this Chapel—about twenty years ago. Let me read it to you:

I first saw Epiphany Church in 1987. It was like discovering a valuable old coin in a jar of ordinary pennies. To the casual eye, the little cottage church appeared to be a rundown relic of yesterday covered with aluminum siding and surrounded by overgrown hedges. Some noticed that the front stoop was worn, but no one remembered that hundreds of World War I soldiers passed through its doors seeking solace and encouragement as they faced the hardships of trench warfare in Europe. Though a two million-dollar restoration project was needed to restore the exterior and interior fabric of the facility, there is no price that can estimate the value and weight of the relationships and memories that shine like the patina on the old oak furniture and are embedded in the worn wooden floor.

Tonight, in our togetherness, all of us—those from the past, the present and maybe even those of the future—we celebrate Christmas Eve. We are joined by all those who we can see—and also, *those who we love but see no longer*. And all those everywhere, around the world, who celebrate this night. There's Jim Conboy at 97 years. And Betty. And Coral and Donald. And some newer friends—Kelly and Tina and Shawn and Shane. Those we see. But there are others who also come through these doors tonight. Those who have died but are part of this home. Helen sits right there. And Hartzell is behind her.

Warren and Richard and Hazel and Alice. My own mother sits right there. Sometimes we see their names on the prayer list or include them in festival memorials. And there are others who have never been here before but they came with you tonight. We carry them with us and within us—generations of family and friends. There are more doors into this Chapel than the three I mentioned. Angels and archangels, shepherds, and kings—they are all here with us tonight around this creche—this home that God has made with humankind. Bethlehem. “House of Bread.” We are all here together. *It feels like home to me.*

There’s a corny ol’ poem I memorized as a child—while I sat on the bed in my grandmother’s guest bedroom looking out the window. The framed poem, painted on glass in gold and black, an antique even then, hung on the wall next to the window. While the adults were doing whatever it is that adults do, I spent hours memorizing this poem. I liked the sing-song sound of it, Now I realize, it also gave me a sense of security and an assurance —that I was loved and valued—something I needed—something everyone needs however old or young you are—the living and the dead. Loved and valued. That’s what feels like home.

*It takes a heap o’ living in a house to make it home.  
A heap of sun and shad’er and you sometimes have to roam  
Afore you really ‘preciate the things you left behind.  
And hunger for ‘em somehow with ‘em always on your mind.*

Home. The word is like a doorway itself —offering the promise of security and the assurance of love. This is the invitation and promise of Christmas Eve. You are welcome in this place for a reason, a season, a lifetime, and beyond. The Centennial Memorial Gardens reminds us of God’s eternal promises of security and love.

Let Christmas Eve be a “thin place” where heaven and earth meet—where God’s home becomes our home. This creche is the vision of home we all have come to see—where the busyness of the world stops—where heaven meets earth. Mother and child. Proud father. Mary and Jesus and Joseph are for us “thin places.” Yes, people can be thin places also. We can be thin places for each other. Thin places are places or events or people — where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we are able to catch glimpses of the divine—of grace and joy and love, of the extraordinary, right here in the midst of the ordinary. And, be reassured that we are loved and of great value to God and to each other. They say that *prayer is humanity’s yearning for God and that grace is God’s yearning for humanity*. In thin places this yearning is fulfilled. And we come together...

*Time and space are not conditions in which we live,  
they are modes in which we think...and feel.*

Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in *thin places* that distance is even shorter. God is everywhere and “everywhen,” Australian aboriginals say so wonderfully. Perhaps the whole world is thin, but we are too thick to recognize it.

One hundred years ago a young priest had an idea, not just any idea, but the very idea. The very idea to create a place—a thin place—a chapel where everyone was welcome, a place set apart, made sacred, a thin place where God and humankind could meet—not only in the happiest of times, but also when the conditions in which we live are the most trying and difficult. The chapel was originally called “a home away from home,” for those leaving everything that was familiar to fight a war in a far-off country — a war that was to end all wars. It was a *hurry-up* sort of time. Many women who had never worked outside the home took jobs in factories, ran the telephone lines, worked in ambulance corps, and served as nurses and administrators for the American Red Cross

at home and abroad. All were ready to go! With enthusiasm they kissed their sweethearts and children good-bye and headed off to intensive bootcamp training, boarded transportation ships and traveled to a far-off country called France. Over one million U.S. troops were stationed in Europe, Many of them hadn't been even a hundred miles from home. Songsters made fun—

*“How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Patee?”*

In such times men and women grow up and they *grow in*. *Growing in*, means learning to see what is most important. When you *grow in*, the word *home* takes on a sacred meaning.

In those days it so happened that a decree was issued by the Emperor Augustus that a census was to be taken of the whole civilized world. Everyone had to travel to their ancestral home to be counted. So Joseph took Mary and together they went to Bethlehem, because he was a descendant of David. Mary was pregnant. And it so happened that while they were there the time came for her to give birth. There was no space for them in the lodge, so she gave birth to her first born child, a son, in a stable wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a feeding trough.

Soon, very soon, through all the doorways came shepherds and through all the cracks in the roof came star light and angels and heavenly creatures singing,

*Glory to God in the highest and Peace to people everywhere.*

Mary took all this into her heart. She and Joseph named the baby Jesus—Savior. Immanuel, God with us forever—promising and giving all of us and each of us

security and the assurance of God's love. And Mary said to Joseph,

*You and this child feel like home to me.*

*In this dark night, down this lonely street,*

*It feels like home to me.*

*Feels like I'm all the way back where I come from.*

*Feels like home to me. Feels like home to me.*

*And as she rocked the child, she whispered,*

*Feels like we're all the way back where we belong.*

This is the doorway. This is promise. This is the gift. Come on in. Let Christmas Eve have it's way with you. Let God have God's way with you. And come home for Christmas.

Amen.