

COME HOME FOR
CHRISTMAS

JESUS IS CALLING YOU
BACK TO THE GREATEST
STORY EVER TOLD

MATTHEW WEST

with Matt Litton



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Come Home for Christmas

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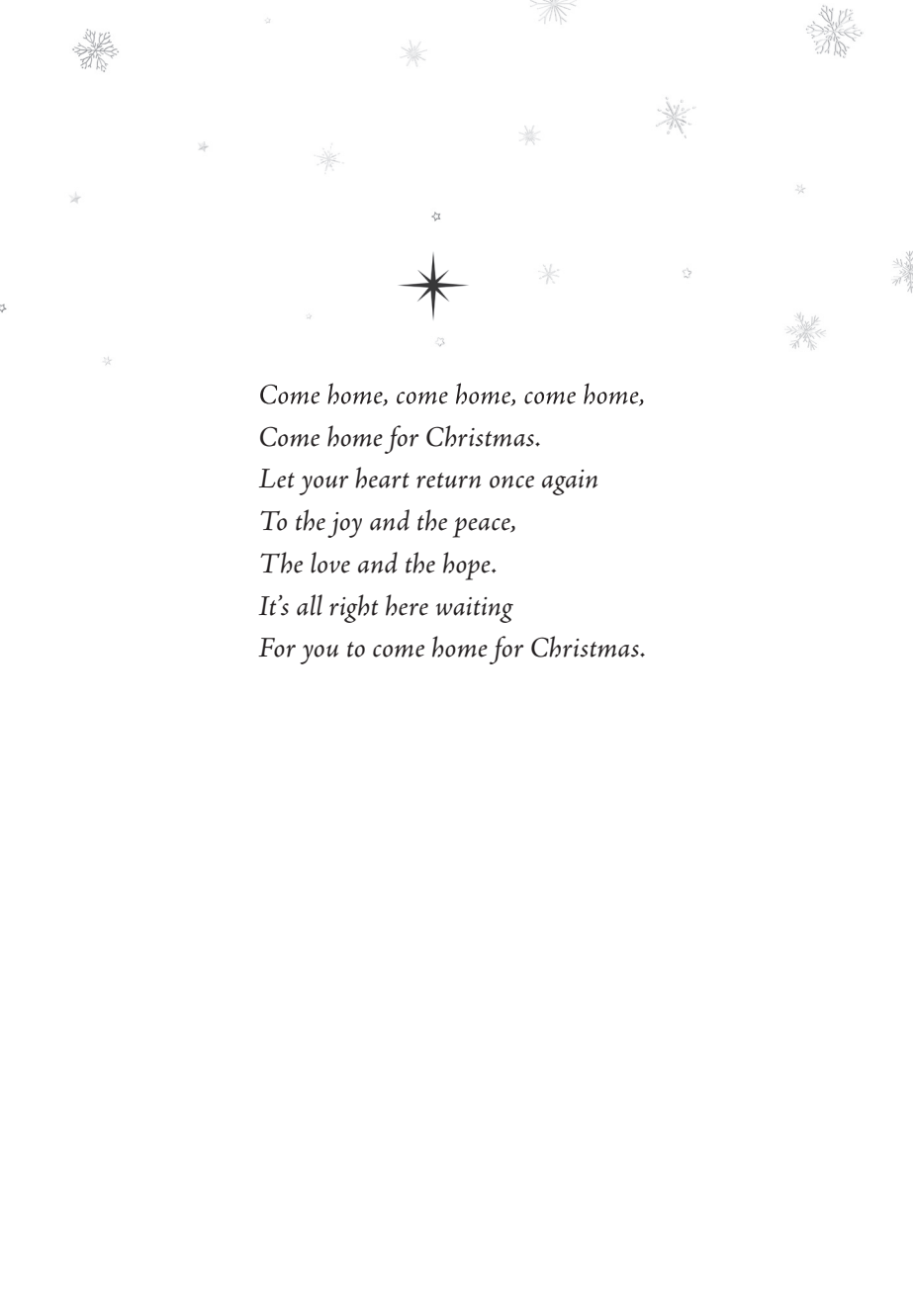
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To Emily, Lulu, and Delaney
Coming home for Christmas will always
mean coming home to you.

—MW





*Come home, come home, come home,
Come home for Christmas.
Let your heart return once again
To the joy and the peace,
The love and the hope.
It's all right here waiting
For you to come home for Christmas.*

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O n e

AN INVITATION HOME

The Good News of Christmas

THERE IS WINTER . . . AND THEN THERE IS WINTER in the Midwest. I am talking about the bitter cold, snow, ice, and strong winds that cut through any coat, hat, scarf, or gloves. The kind of winter that takes your breath away when you walk out the front door, gets right into your bones, and makes your teeth chatter. Many of you know exactly what I am talking about. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, I got used to winter temperatures like the one on Christmas Eve in 1983 that notched a glacial negative twenty-five degrees! It makes the cold where I live now in Tennessee seem trivial. I remember as a kid how many

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of my friends would travel somewhere warm with their families after school got out for the holidays to escape the cold. But not my family. My dad was a preacher, and most years, when we had a few days around Christmas to get away from Dad's church responsibilities, we headed some three hundred miles north of Downers Grove, Illinois, to a not-so-tropical paradise called Mason City, Iowa. If you look at a map, you'll find Mason City is almost as far north as you can go in Iowa and not be in Minnesota. For Dad, that trip meant coming home for Christmas.

My dad grew up in Mason City, and most of my cousins still lived there. It was a Christmastime tradition for us to make the trek for just a day or two for a family Christmas visit to Grandma's house. When I close my eyes, I can still picture the long interstate drive, speeding past piles of new snow and sitting in the backseat next to my brothers in my parents' old red Ford station wagon. I remember how we would listen to Christmas music the whole drive, and I can still hear my favorite classic, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," playing on the radio as we'd pull up to the modest home that belonged to my grandma, Luella West. There wasn't enough room for all of us to stay comfortably, but somehow, we would always manage to squeeze in for a visit. It was important to her that everyone was invited home for Christmas. And no matter what Mom and Dad had going on during the Christmas season, we always said yes to her invitation to visit.

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Now, my grandma had raised ten kids—nine boys (including my dad, Joe) and one girl. She was a tiny lady, not even five feet tall, but she was strong, loving, and a fierce protector of the refrigerator door in her kitchen, making sure it stayed closed. My dad tells some great stories of just how destitute they were when he was growing up. My grandpa worked at the local meatpacking plant while Grandma took care of all the kids. Before they had running water in the house, they were only able to fill one bathtub with warm water. So, my dad and his siblings would draw straws for bath time because none of them wanted to be among the last to get in that water. Dad says sometimes you could actually get out of the bath dirtier than when you went in! Grandpa struggled with alcohol until Grandma West hit him with a frying pan. Somehow in that exchange he found the Lord, and they never missed another Sunday at their local Assemblies of God church, but that is probably a story for another book.

All of her children grew up and had kids of their own, which meant Grandma had a small village of grandchildren to buy presents for and a lot to do in order to host all the families that she insisted visit at Christmas. My dad's brother Jim was killed in Vietnam, so there was always an empty chair at the table at Christmas. Even with the joy of so many grandkids, I think that was a painful part of the holidays for Grandma West and the rest of the family. It didn't stop her from saying yes to Christmas, though. I

was pretty young when my grandpa passed away in 1984. But the invitations to her home kept coming, and so did her thoughtful Christmas gifts to her many grandchildren. Every single Christmas of my childhood, I could always count on finding the same blunt object, perfectly wrapped, that jingled when I shook it, left under the tree from Grandma to me (more on that in the book's final chapter).

The Iowa holiday gatherings weren't perfect—sometimes they were chaotic and stressful—but each visit was something we all treasured. Now that I am much older and can look back on those days with some perspective, I realize that it was my grandma West's sacrifice that made those Christmas visits feel special. You know, I still love classic Christmas music, and I can't hear "I'll Be Home for Christmas" without thinking of the way my dad faithfully made the pilgrimage home each year for the holidays—and how Grandma would make everyone feel like they belonged.

Christmas Is a Homecoming

I've always loved the way Christmas felt like an invitation home—from my family home as a kid, to visits to Grandma West's, to driving home from college in my Honda Prelude, and to the moment I get home to Nashville and to my girls for Christmas. A few years ago,

as I was singing at the annual lighting of the Christmas tree in the town square of Franklin, Tennessee, I was struck by the magic of that special moment. This little town south of Nashville does Christmas right. Old-time Christmas movies are playing at the local theater. Folks are dressed up like they stepped out of a Charles Dickens novel. A children's choir is practicing their big number, all while the mayor prepares to lead the entire town in a countdown to the lighting of the tree in the town square. It's about as festive as festive can get!

Seeing all this gave me the idea to invite people from around the country to take part in a hometown Christmas celebration. I sat down and wrote a Christmas song one evening at my Story House studio, which brought back memories of my favorite Christmas songs on the radio and those snowy drives to my grandmother's house in Iowa each year. The song also evoked the special moments I experienced in Christmas services at my dad's church on Hobson Road and how I feel when I finally get home from that very last tour of the season and walk into my house to celebrate Christmas with the people I love. The song was a personal reminder that in the middle of whatever is happening in the world, and whatever is happening in my life, Christmas is a time to return to the wonder, hope, joy, love, and peace offered to us when we turn our focus to the gift of Jesus. "Come Home for Christmas" was born as a song and a yearly event to invite people to celebrate

the true meaning of Christmas. Every year, hundreds of people make the journey to Tennessee, and we celebrate Christmas together!

The theme of that song still speaks into my life in many ways as I prepare my heart for Christmas each season. I have been moved by how God has used the message of coming home. Christmas is a time when we are all invited to physically come home to family. It is a season when we are called to let go of past grievances, make amends, forgive, and allow God to mend relationships that may have become broken over the years. Christmas is an invitation to embrace compassion and offer our presence and our resources to people in need. Christmas is the time to celebrate and share the good news of the gospel with the world. God took the song and the event and did something I didn't expect in my life and in the lives of the people around me. "Come Home to Christmas" was more than a classic Christmas tune and gathering—it started a movement of people making the journey back to the heart of why we celebrate the season. It became a reminder that no matter how far we wander from home, we are always welcome back into the arms of Jesus. Christmas has always been a call back to our true home.

You see, Christmas is the story of God inviting us back to Him. God loved us so much that He sent His only Son—the Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, the Everlasting Father—helpless into a manger so He could

grow up, walk in our shoes, and finally go to a cross to die for our sins. Christmas celebrates the person of Jesus, who is our invitation to come home to the Father. That first Christmas in Bethlehem began with a heavenly celebration that invited us all with “good news that will cause great joy for all the people” announced by angels (Luke 2:10). Christmas means coming home to the good news that God has stopped at nothing to find us and bring us back to Him. And that is something worth hanging lights, decorating trees, and baking cookies for—laughing, singing, giving, loving, and celebrating.

Who Is Invited to Christmas?

I love Christmas so much that my family has given me the nickname Mr. Christmas. And you better believe that Mr. Christmas loves throwing Christmas parties and having Christmas get-togethers (especially my Come Home for Christmas events). This time of year, there always seems to be a guest list for holiday events. A friend of mine works at a corporation that has their Christmas party at a hockey game each December—but you have to be on the guest list to get into the suite. In the capital of the music world in Nashville, there are always swanky holiday parties hosted by big record labels, and you have to be on the guest list to get in the door. Even the fundraisers at Christmastime

usually require an invitation to get in! One of the things I remember fondly about visiting my grandma when I was young was that we always knew we had an open invitation to her place (as long as we kept the refrigerator door closed). And one of the special things about the real story of Christmas is that there is no VIP list limiting who can and can't come home for Christmas.

The Bible tells us in John 3:16 that God sent His Son to save the world. Not just a carefully selected list of who's who. Nope. The world—meaning the whole world—is invited to respond to His invitation. The “John 3:16ness” of God means that there is a pretty long guest list for His Christmas party. What does that look like? Throughout His teaching, Jesus used stories called parables to show people how the kingdom of God works. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus described a wedding banquet where invitees decided not to show up. He said that the host of the party told his servants to go find people who would say yes to the invitation: “Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests” (22:9–11).

In Luke 14, while Jesus was having dinner at the house of an important religious leader, He told another curious story about invitations that we call the parable of the great banquet. He said:

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A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, "Come, for everything is now ready." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, "I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me." Another said, "I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me." Still another said, "I just got married, so I can't come." The servant came back and reported this to his master. (vv. 16–21)

Again, Jesus was telling the story of a party or feast where those who were invited decided not to show up.

In the first century, if someone was throwing a party—just like today—they would send out invitations for an RSVP. When the meal was ready, the host would send a servant to bring the guests to dinner. In that culture, it would be considered insulting not to show up. Of course, think about all the preparation you go through to have a party. How would it feel for the people you invited to back out at the last minute? The food is made, the table is set, the drinks are poured . . . and the guests decide to ghost you? In Luke's parable, the guests have RSVPd but decide other things are more important than showing up. Instead of canceling, the host decides the party will go on! Jesus explained what the master chose to do with the feast: "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes

and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet” (vv. 23–24).

Both stories reflect the truth that the kingdom of God is going to look a lot different than people think. But another reason these parables are so powerful is that Jesus was pointing out how important it is to respond to His invitation. In both parables, servants were sent out to collect everyone around town who would say yes. In Matthew’s account, anyone who would say yes was welcomed in (the good and the bad). In Luke’s retelling, the poor, the lame, and the sick (all the people who wouldn’t have been high on dinner invitation lists) got invited. The only consistent thing about the people who made it to the feast was that they all said yes to the invitation.

When I read these stories, it makes me think about how God is always inviting me closer to Him. I think the way we celebrate Christmas reflects what we believe about the kingdom of God. We often miss the point that Christmas is the invitation to come home to Jesus. I hope I wouldn’t be one of those people in the parable too busy to show up to the party, but honestly, how often do I get so preoccupied with what I am doing that I miss the invitation from God to join in what He is doing?

How often do you get too busy, too distracted, too focused on the wrong things, and miss the point of Christmas? Maybe these stories Jesus tells highlight how

easily we can lose sight of the reason for the season. But the parables should also remind us of God's grace in offering us an invitation to His lavish banquet, regardless of what we have done, where we have been, or how long we have been gone. As I think about the invitation to come home for Christmas, I wonder how I am responding to God's RSVP this season. How are you answering God's invitation to come home to Him this Christmas? What if Christmas begins when we say yes to His story for us?

Christmas Means Saying Yes to the Party

When we look at the biblical account of Jesus' birth, it is so interesting that all the important characters involved in the story said yes to an invitation to participate in God's plan for the first Christmas. Have you ever thought about how Mary had to say yes to the angel Gabriel's question of whether she would consent to being the mother of God's only Son? To be honest, I had never noticed this until recently, when I was studying the Gospel of Luke. When Gabriel told Mary of all that was about to unfold in her life, she responded, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). She wasn't an unwilling participant in God's plan to redeem the world. She actually RSVPd for the party that would unfold in Bethlehem.

And it wasn't just Mary who said yes to God's invitation. Joseph had to agree to take Mary as his wife *after* she had been found to be with child. Can you imagine the gossip those two dealt with in their small town as the news unfolded? In Israel at the time, Mary could've faced some pretty harsh consequences for being an unwed mother, and they would have been tough to endure as a young teenager. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph considered quietly divorcing Mary until an angel showed up in a dream and told him what was up: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (1:20). Joseph followed through with his yes to God's command: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife" (v. 24). I love how Joseph was a man of action—he literally just rolled out of bed and followed God's directions.

Even the three wise men's adventure to seek out the Messiah at the end of a mysterious star was a profound act of saying yes. They had to plan a long journey from the east and carry some carefully curated presents with them. They even went to King Herod, who had a scary reputation, looking for the newborn King! Going to Herod to ask about a newborn king may not have been the safest move. They must've had some really big faith in what they were going to find at the end of that star. The Gospel of Matthew shows how intent the wise men were on worshipping Jesus

as they asked Herod about the star: “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (2:2).

And we even see a yes from the shepherds as they received an angelic invitation in the middle of the night to join in the first Christmas party. They immediately decided to clock out and leave their jobs (and flocks of sheep) behind to go stumbling through the dark and into that small town of Bethlehem, searching for this baby in a manger: “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about’” (Luke 2:15).

While Christmas is the story of God inviting us home to Him in the person of Jesus, it is also a story of how Jesus entered into this moment through the faith-filled yesses of people like you and me. You see, even the story of that first Christmas was built on the people who said yes to God’s invitation. But we also have to slow down.

Recognizing God’s Invitation

I vividly remember those Christmas mornings as a kid and how my brothers and I always scoped out the gifts with our respective names on them. In fact, we’d quickly map out which gift we wanted to open first as soon as we caught

our breath from running downstairs. I usually found which package looked like it might hold the pair of Air Jordans I had been holding out hope for all year. The Christmas morning madness was just about to begin, and we would soon be swimming in a sea of crumpled wrapping paper and presents. And just as our hands touched that first present, we would hear, “Hold up, boys!” Dad’s voice always brought the room to a standstill.

We would turn to see him holding up his Bible, and we three brothers would let out a collective groan of disappointment. Don’t get me wrong; I love the Good Book, but it was the timing I took issue with on Christmas mornings! As a kid, it felt like some cruel form of punishment, a parent’s ultimate power move to remind their kid who’s really in charge! And every year, we would stop and read from Luke 2. Each year it was a different family member’s turn to read the story of the birth of Jesus. My youngest brother’s turn was the most painful when he was learning how to read, and time stretched on for an eternity as he struggled to pronounce words like *swaddling* and *manger*. After the reading, Dad would lead us in prayer, and his “amen” was the checkered flag that set us free to open gifts.

Of course, Dad wasn’t trying to annoy us—there was a method to his madness. By opening the Bible, he was inviting us home to the truth of Christmas. The gifts waiting under the tree were never the point of Christmas—the day was about the immensely greater gift of Jesus. My dad

wanted to make sure we never let a Christmas pass without missing God's invitation.

Now that I'm a dad, you better believe I enjoy driving my own children crazy on Christmas morning by holding up my Bible and stopping to read from Luke 2. Of all the Christmas traditions our family carries on, this is my favorite. For a sacred moment, the chaos and excitement of Christmas morning comes to a brief standstill. We quiet our hearts, we still our spirits, and we recognize that God is calling us home to the greatest story ever told, the greatest gift ever given, and the greatest love the world has ever known.

A Standing Invitation to Come Home

The good news of the gospel is that we all have an open invitation to come home for Christmas. But why do we miss it? Why do we so often ignore God's invitation home? You know, I first started dreaming of the Come Home for Christmas message in 2020 when I was off the road because of the Covid pandemic. My newsfeed seemed to be full of bad news, chaos, and despair. I remember how the idea felt like an invitation to return to the joy, peace, love, and hope of that special night in Bethlehem and something we all desperately needed—to return physically and spiritually to Christmas. At the risk of sounding

cliché, I know for certain that God wants to bring you home this Christmas.

I don't know exactly what that means in your life today as you read these words. Maybe it simply means getting in a car and driving three hours to be with family. Maybe, if you're being honest, Christmas just hasn't felt the way it used to. Maybe you feel so overwhelmed by the things on your to-do list that you've tended to miss the heart of Christmas in the past. Maybe you have made some decisions in your life that have separated you from a close relationship with God. I'm confident He wants to bring Christmas to your heart this season with boundless healing and redemption. The truth about Christmas isn't complicated. On that holy night in Bethlehem, God was writing your name on an invitation to eternal life—one that still stands today. Jesus is just waiting for you to say yes.

And when I think back on Christmases as a kid, I realize that I learned much more about the heart of Christmas from my visits to Grandma West's house than I ever could have realized. Coming home is more than a feeling, more than an obligation. It isn't perfect and isn't without grief, but coming home is saying yes to love, yes to sacrifice, yes to joy, and yes to the Savior. I learned that no matter where you are and what you have been through, you are always welcome home for Christmas. You see, before Christmas is anything else, it is the story of a God who has crossed the universe to come to you. He loves you so much that He was

born into a manger, died on a cross, and was resurrected so you can come home to Him.

Maybe this is the Christmas you can say yes to His invitation home to joy. I hope this is the season you say yes to the wonder of a child. Maybe this is the year you accept His invitation home to healing and forgiveness. I believe God is waiting for you to say yes to peace and compassion. This Christmas season I want you to come home to the manger and to a story that is still true. I hope you'll take a break from the busyness of this time of year, waiting expectantly to hear God's invitation in a new way. This is the "why" of this book you hold in your hands. Don't let the holiday season come and go without the story of Jesus' birth transforming your life. I pray that you will come home to the heart of Christmas in a whole new way and say yes to the Savior who came down from heaven just for you! I hope your journey through this book will open your heart to return to Him once again and embrace the greatest gift you could ever receive: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Luke 2:11).

COME HOME QUESTIONS



- What is your fondest Christmas memory as a child? What was special about it?
- What busyness do you need to put aside this season in order to recognize God's invitation home?
- What are the things in your life keeping you from the heart of Christmas?
- Who do you need to reconcile with or forgive this Christmas?
- Which of the characters in the nativity story most resembles where you are in your journey with God this Christmas season?
- What invitation is God asking you to say yes to right now?