

“Keep the Home Fires Burning” December 13, 2009

I like to learn new things, and I did when doing my preparation for today. I have often heard the term “keep the home fires burning,” and I was pretty sure I understood the basic meaning of that phrase, but I had no idea where it had originated. In doing a little research, I discovered that it came into usage during World War I, partly because of a song by that very name. The song referred to the families left at home while soldiers were off fighting the war, and the encouragement was for those on the home front to keep things pleasant and in good order while those who typically live in the home were away, especially at war.

While we don't use that terminology very much these days, it could certainly apply to today's situation, as well as to World War I. After all, we continue to be at war on two fronts—both in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and there are thousands of men and women away from home, and those who remain here are trying to keep things going. They are left to maintain the home and the family, and keep things in as good an order as they possibly can, while their loved ones are off fighting.

The phrase, “keep the home fires burning,” refers to keeping things in order while someone is gone, but that term also had a literal sense to it. In World War I days, homes were often heated by a wood stove, and the fire had to be stoked several times a day to keep the home warm and comfortable. That responsibility of keeping the fire going fell to whoever was at home.

Knowing that certainly brought back memories for me, because when I was growing up, we lived in a house that was well over a hundred years old, and it was heated by a coal furnace. One of the first sounds I heard on cold winter mornings was my Dad heading down to the basement, shoveling coal into the furnace, stoking the fire. All we had to do was stand over the register to feel the warmth from his labors. He saw it as his job to keep the fire burning to provide the warmth we needed.

Unless we put a real fire in our fireplace, or build a bonfire or a campfire outdoors, most of us only flip a switch to provide the warmth we want today, so we've lost the literal sense of what it means to keep the home fires burning. Nonetheless, I think there are some very real

ways that we can keep them burning in a symbolic way, especially during the holiday season.

We do that via the rituals and traditions that make this time of year so special. What is it that we do that represents the warmth and love of home? How do we preserve and honor one or more of our traditions, receiving them from those who've gone before, and passing them on to the next generation?

It seems to me that we seldom remember the specific gifts given or received at Christmas, but we often reminisce about the little things that seem to embody the holiday for us. One of the reasons I say that is because of our own family. Our only child, our daughter, now is married with a home of her own and a beautiful baby girl who will celebrate her first Christmas this year.

There are a couple of things that our daughter remembers that have come to represent Christmas to her. One is a mixture of spices and fruit that I typically put on the stove to simmer. It adds a nice fragrance to the house, and smelling it reminds her of Christmas. Now Mike thinks it distorts the fragrances he needs to smell when he is cooking, and since he does most of the cooking, I try to honor that, but I still get the homey scent going as much as I can.

And there's another thing. As we were discussing the holidays, Erin asked me where the advent wreath was that we always had on our kitchen table when she was growing up. She wanted to know if they could have it at their house. Frankly, I had totally forgotten that we ever did such a thing—putting out what's called an advent wreath.

An advent wreath is a ‘churchy’ kind of tradition that consists of a circular wreath, made of either ceramic or greenery, that has four candles of pink and lavender around it marking the four Sundays prior to Christmas. In the center is one white candle called the Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. I really didn't realize that it had meant anything to Erin when we had it. When I learned that it really did matter to her, we conducted an all-out search and found it, along with the book of readings that accompanied it. It's now become a Christmas tradition in their home.

There are other such traditions that people honor, generation after generation. Someone on Worship Team shared that a volunteer she was working with shared something that had become important to her. It

seems that one of the things she did each year was make noodles with her grandmother. It was a day-long experience that the granddaughter, now 26, wasn't just about to miss, and it was on her list of Christmas experiences again this year.

Someone talked about making a tradition of giving family members an ornament every year, and yet others told of ornaments they made when they were kids that still hang on the Christmas tree. That's certainly true at our house with the little half nut shell that's painted gold, with some cotton in it, and a little replica of baby Jesus that Erin made when she was a preschooler.

You see, we're talking about the things that somehow signify Christmas, and all the things that make a home welcoming and inviting. As someone has said, "Your home is where your favorite memories are." Hopefully, that's true for all of us, but I realize it may not necessarily be so.

I suspect a yearning for home is why Jesus spent as much time as it appears he did in the home of his friends Mary, Martha in the little town of Bethany. It was a place of comfort, and held memories of warmth and love for him. Since he was always on the road traveling from one place to another, he needed somewhere to call home, and their home seems to have been that kind of place. Our Bible passage puts it like this: "As the continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home."

The reality is that some of us will be traveling to other homes, and some of us will be welcoming those who are traveling to our homes. What might it mean this Christmas for us to keep the home fires burning for family and friends?

Obviously, the holidays bring up memories—some warm and pleasant ones, and I'm certain some that are painful and difficult. Families are all different, and every family has its shares of joys to celebrate, along with valleys to walk through. Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky said this about home: "No matter under what circumstances you leave it, home does not cease to be home. No matter how you lived there—well or poorly."

What is it that makes a home? Obviously it's more than a foundation and some walls divided into various rooms which serve certain purposes. Home can become a refuge, a safe place, a sanctuary of sorts, and it becomes that because of the little things that we

do. Maybe it's always lighting candles during a meal, turning it from an ordinary supper into a feast. Maybe it's a quilt made by family members who are no longer with us that reminds us of their loving presence, and provides warmth emotionally and physically.

A home represents so much more than physical "things." Tom Ehrich, who's an Episcopal priest and writer, grew up in Indianapolis, and in one of his columns a couple of years ago, he talked about coming home for a high school class reunion. In his reflection, he shared how aware he had become that each experience in his life while at home here made him who he is today. He wrote, "It is about us and our yearning to be whole—not a yearning to have lived perfect childhoods, or to have avoided every pimply gaffe, but to have lived, to have endured, to have tested the waters of first love, to have taken the risk of leaving home, and to have been shaped and reshaped by life."

That's what gets passed on, isn't it? It's a accumulation of the life experiences—some significant, and some reasonably insignificant—that go together and make us who we are. Sometimes it's the memories that we carry forward and share, and sometimes it's the seemingly minor experiences like something as simple as an orange simmering on the stove, or a long-forgotten advent wreath.

Sue Monk-Kidd, in her book *FirstLight*, shared a way that her husband, Sandy, helped her keep the home fire burning by carrying a significant piece of their past forward. She talked about moving out of the house that had been their home for so many years, and on moving day, wandering from room to room collecting all the memories, reluctant to leave the familiar warmth of this place called home.

One of her favorite spots had been by the fireplace, where she and Sandy had spent so many winter evenings watching the fire's glow. She stood for some time staring at the half-burned log on a pile of ashes, remnants of the last fire burned at the end of winter. Sandy misunderstood her long look at the fireplace, and went to get the broom to clean out it out, leaving it spotless for the new homeowner. When he came back, he was carrying the broom and a packing box. She left the room, taking the ashes out back to dispose of them.

Over the next several weeks, they unpacked and tried to adjust to their new surroundings, and yet nothing seemed like home. The cold wind of winter began blowing, and the house seemed cold and unwelcoming.

Sandy heard her sigh, and put down his magazine and left the room. After a few minutes, he returned with yet another packing box. Sue thought they had unpacked everything, and was dismayed to see yet another packing box to be undone.

"I've been saving this one in the garage," Sandy said. "Open it." As she peeled back the top, she came upon a sooty, half-burned log. It was the log from the last fire in their old house that Sandy had lovingly saved for the first fire in their new home. He laid the log in the fireplace, gathered kindling and struck a match. The old log ignited, and flames started licking around the kindling. Sue Monk-Kidd said, "For the first time, it felt like home." That was their way to keep the home fires burning. What will be ours this year?

Close:

Mark Twain wrote these words about home:

"Our house had a heart, and a soul, and eyes to see us with; and approvals, and solitudes, and deep sympathies; It was of us, and we were in its confidence, and lived in its grace and in the peace of its benediction...we could not enter it unmoved."

As we draw another day closer to Christmas, I hope and pray that we will cherish and preserve that which is the essence of home, and in our own way, keep the home fires burning.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.