

These folks, by the way, are not the others.

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“Home, Home”

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They pulled into their apartment in the wee hours of December 29. A blizzard south of Denver delayed them. She dropped her husband off at the airport to pick up their car while she followed a snowplow to the Enterprise lot. Sliding into a ditch, she remembered dad telling her how to rock the car to regain traction. They left Oakland, California, at noon, December 27, to drive home. They choose the southern route via Bakersfield rather than cross the Rockies. It was the best option, given flights to Colorado canceled for a week. Our daughter exclaimed as only our daughter can (she did get the first red card at the new stadium years ago for expressing her displeasure to a referee): “We’re not traveling for Christmas again (expletives deleted)!”

When picking up our dog at the kennel on Wednesday, I ran into a fellow who ended up driving back to our area. A friend reported how in Canada, dozens spent their Christmas at a Walmart, taking advantage of blow up mattresses.

Our son, at his airport, ran into a young couple with a baby that had been stranded for 24 hours. They were hungry, out of milk. Our son travels like a trooper. He asked if they wanted some empanadas, among other things. He shared from his backpack. This was their Christmas meal.

What did they and tens of thousands of other holiday travelers have in common? The vast majority of the travelers simply wanted to go home or to arrive at the home of a loved one.

Home. It is such a lovely word. How fortunate we are. While we gathered as a family for Christmas, officials in the Bay Area ordered the clearing out of homeless encampments, many beneath highway overpasses. We passed one such encampment with some tents remaining along with a plywood teepee. Our elder daughter wondered where the people went. Was this cruel? Or was it to prevent deaths given the dropping temperatures, hoping some of the homeless would choose to enter the offered shelters. These folks, by the way, are not the others.

The causes of homelessness are manifold, usually bad choices or persons powerless to handle the choices of others. Let me count the ways. Mental illness (were State Hospital such a bad idea?), addictions, job loss, low-paying jobs, indebtedness, health crises, divorce, abuse, lack of affordable apartments, lack of transportation, broken social systems. What’s an average decent apartment cost in Danville? A key cause of homelessness is broken relationships, lack of a family supportive structure. A reason I found homelessness to be a compelling ministry was because if it weren’t for family two of our children could easily have slipped into this mire.

Systemic problems require systemic solutions. Our own Gate House is a worthy model for how to address homelessness. Houston, I’ve heard, is on the right track. Let’s research what they are doing. Treating symptoms may be necessary in a pinch, but treating causes is the cure. Soup Kitchens, shelters, hand-outs may be necessary for emergencies, but, like donated toys or winter coats, they cannot address root causes. Material relief has its place, but a changed world-view is essential. Trevor Noah said how he appreciates the cliché of instead of giving a man a fish you teach him to fish. With a wink

he added: "Of course, he still needs a fishing pole." You want another dumb catch phrase? A rising tide lifts all boats. Not if some boats are anchored fast. Then there's, 'pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps.' You do realize this is impossible.

Most of our charity isn't. Love without justice really isn't love. We cheat persons of their dignity. Most of what we assume is charity actually hurts the poor. It's offering a cupcake rather than bread, candy rather than vegetables. We fail to empower those who are poor and struggling. In Nicaragua I learnt that when the do-gooders finally listened to an angry mother struggling against all odds did improvement begin, in partnership. Who are we to assume what she needed? I'd love to see Credit Unions for the poor sponsored by churches to help the poor circumvent some of the legal welfare formulas that penalize the poor from gaining wealth.

Our son and his co-workers were trying to frame these years into three stages. I paraphrase their conclusion. 2020 was the gut punch. 2021 and 2022 was trying to find equilibrium. The hope is that 2023 will be a year of promise.