



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Advent 1 Wednesday

November 30, 2016

“Jesus Our Home”

(Isaiah 40:1-2)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Collect of the Day: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The idea of home and homecoming is a powerful one. Your home is much more than your residence. It's your sanctuary, the place where you rest, the place where you can be beyond the reach of mean and unsmiling people. Home is where you are fed. It's where your bed is, your family room, your books, your music, your grandmother's quilt and the kitchen table. It's the place to which you retreat when you're too tired to work any longer. It's the place where you belong, where you feel safe, hopefully, and can relax and be yourself. When you are away from home, after a while, you grow homesick. Even if you're having a grand time on vacation, how nice it is to come home and crawl into your own bed.

In Advent of 1943 Lutheran theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents and friends from his Nazi prison cell, where he was imprisoned until his execution for resisting the Nazis. Home and homesickness repeatedly come up. To a friend in the German army: "How marvelous that you are home for Advent! I can imagine you singing hymns together" (p. 101). A few days later, he wrote, "I wonder where we shall both be for Christmas?" (p. 103) And finally, near Christmas, "There have been a few occasions in my life when I have had to learn what homesickness means. There is no agony worse than this. During the months in prison I have sometimes been terribly homesick" (p. 112).

Also in Scripture, home and homesickness and homecoming is an important motif, a central theme which keeps coming up. After having rebelled against God, Adam and Eve were escorted out of the garden and barred from ever entering again. They became homeless and homesick.

Later, the children of Abraham become enslaved in Egypt, foreigners in a foreign land. Those slave barracks were anything but home, sweet home. After the Lord brought them out, they wander homeless in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting, yearning for a homeland. Eventually God gives them that land, the Promised Land. But because of sin and rebellion, they cannot hold on to it. That's when the worst thing that could happen to a nation happened to God's people.

It was six centuries before Christ. Their armies of Judah were defeated and pushed all the way back to the capital city of Jerusalem by the superior forces of Babylon. Then the Babylonians lay siege on the city, and finally the city collapses. The city walls are breached, the city overrun. And then, as always happens, the looting, the pillaging, the awful crimes against humanity. The Babylonians destroy much of the city, paying particular attention to the Temple, the heart and soul of Judah, which they tear down, stone from stone. Then, as was their custom with every nation they vanquished, the Babylonians assemble all the leading and important citizens of Judah, the businesspeople, the artisans and musicians and priests and lawyers . . . they assemble all the leading citizens and march them across the desert to Babylon, where they put them to work. It was a way of insuring Judah would remain subdued and submissive for decades. It was also a way of building Babylon's commerce and culture and palaces.

It's called "The Exile," and it lasted seven decades. A whole generation of God's people died and another came of age in Babylon. And they longed for home, told stories about how it used to be in sweet home Jerusalem. They sang songs about home. Most difficult of all was that in their separation from home and from the temple, they sensed they had lost their God, or worse, that God had washed his hands of them, had finally become so fed up with them that he cut himself loose from the covenant and had abandoned them. It was a time of deep sadness. One of their psalmists wrote:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of those songs of Zion!” How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you . . .” (Ps. 137).

The only thing that kept those people from despair was the thought of home and the hope, (faint as it might be), that God had not abandoned them . . . that God would rescue them and redeem them and bring them home. They began to see their redemption in terms of going home.

And after the 70 years of promised exile, it finally happens. God sees to it that the exiles are released. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” meaning he’ll bless them twice as much with good things to the punishment she deserved for her sin. They’re going home. God has not forgotten them. God knows exactly where they are, knows their names, knows what they need, has forgiven them already, loves them still and will richly bless them.

They did nothing to deserve this. This redemption is an act of divine mercy without any merit or worthiness on their part.

But this prophecy of Isaiah sees further than just the release of the captives in Babylon. It looks ahead also to our release from captivity of sin through Jesus, and still further ahead to his return with great might to bring us home.

You see, exile is more than just geographical. In many and various ways we too are living far away from home. As sin barred Adam and Eve from the garden, and as sin barred God’s ancient people from the Promised Land, so sin bars us from God. Sin separates us from God. It creates distance between us and God. It exiles us from God. And

by nature, we are full of sin. That's who we are. That's what we do, think and say. That's also what we fail to do, think and say.

But here's the Good News. God loves us nonetheless, and desires that none should perish. So he sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law to redeem those under the Law. Jesus, our all-powerful King, Jesus our gentle Shepherd went to the cross to redeem us from sin and death. There he was crucified for us. That's how he rescued us from exile. That's the way he chose to redeem us from sin and earn for us eternal life with him in heaven.

God has reconciled himself to us through his Son Jesus. But we're not yet home, are we? Can you feel it? Can you feel the occasional homesickness deep down in your soul? Sometimes it's faint, it's a low burn homesickness. But at other times we long for our heavenly home almost with an edge of despair.

When I visit them in their homes or at the hospital, some of our own members here start sounding like the prophets of old: "How long, O Lord, how long?" "Why am I still here? Why won't he come and take me home?" They're ready today, and they see no point delay. They yearn to go home.

We can see this same yearning in Psalm 42: "As the deer pants for streams of flowing water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps. 42:1). That's where some of our members are at. And that's where you and I would also be if only we knew what we miss.

Exile is more than just geographical, so there is or should be a bit of homesickness in us all. Many try to satisfy it by building their castle here on earth and stuffing it with fine things. But a hope and a homesickness placed in the heart by God can never be satisfied with bricks and mortar and plumbing and electrical conduit. I think deep down we know God has something else in mind . . . something bigger, brighter, infinitely better.

And we're not there yet. Hebrews 11 says we are

“aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show they are . . . longing for a better homeland, a heavenly one” (v. 13ff.). And again, from Philippians 3, “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20).

Thousands of years ago, God’s people learned to think of their redemption as going home. Today, God invites us to see our redemption also in terms of going home. In John 14, Jesus said, “In my Father’s mansion there are many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place (a home) for you . . . and I will come back to take you to be with me where I am.”

So if home is that place where you are sheltered and can finally rest, then heaven is your home. If home for you is a sanctuary from mean and unsmiling people, then heaven is your home. If home is where you are fed and refreshed and restored, then heaven is your home. If home is a place of music and feasting and friends, if home is a place where you are always welcomed, always loved, always belong, then heaven is your home.

And the one hanged on the cross is the one who has already earned that home for you and already given it to you. Jesus said, “I say to you whoever hears my word and believes . . . has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Jesus is the One who will come again to rescue us from this exile and take us home. The strong, saving news is that he loves the world so much as to never give up on it, loves the world so much as to be born into it and die for it so that those created by God might return to God, where we know ourselves to be loved and welcomed, cared for and never forgotten – and ultimately, fully safe, whole, at peace., and finally home.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might. Behold, he will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” Amen.

