

December 10, 2017
Second Sunday in Advent

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Mark 1:1-8
Isaiah 40:1-11

Coming Home

It was the ancient Palestinian version of the Trail of Tears. Following a long siege, the armies of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon breached the city walls of Jerusalem in 587 BC. They captured King Zedekiah, executed his two sons before his eyes, then blinded the old man. After that, the Babylonians sacked the city, giving particular destructive attention to Solomon's magnificent Temple. It was Judah's heart and soul.



"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low." – Isaiah 40:4a

Then they lined up all the leaders of the community – teachers, doctors, merchants, lawyers and priests -- all the educated and influential members of the community, leaving behind the poorest people to fend for themselves. They marched the captives across hundreds of miles of brutal desert, "resettling" them in Babylon where they lived as virtual slaves.

If you can imagine what it is like to be a Syrian Christian this Advent, or a member of the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole or Cherokee nations in the 1830's, if you can fathom what it would have been like for African men, women and children as they were rounded up, packed into filthy ships like cargo, and sold into slavery...they sang,

*Swing low, sweet chariot, Comin' for to carry me home, and
Deep River, My home is over Jordan...*

The spiritual depth in those songs is staggering. If you can imagine what that was like -- the humiliation, the powerlessness and resignation, and the loneliness – then you have some idea of the experience of the people of 6th century Judah.

That period in Jewish history is known as The Exile, or The Babylonian Captivity. It lasted nearly 50 years. For two and a half generations God's people lived as strangers in a strange land. At first they grieved for their lost home, telling stories and singing songs of lament for Zion. One of the verses of Psalm 44 cries out:

*Our heart has not turned back,
Nor have our steps departed from your way,
Yet you [God] have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness. ¹*

And Psalm 137 laments:

*By the waters of Babylon
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there
we hung up our lyres
For there our captors
asked us for songs...
saying sing us one of the songs of Zion.*

*How can we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land? ²*

Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel tried to keep the people buoyed and focused on God's promise, but it was difficult. With the loss of their place of worship the Hebrew people had lost their center, their home. The sense of shock, of abandonment and sorrow – a sense of pessimism, that things will always be this way...it was overwhelming. The life that they had built, all the progress they had made was simply – gone.

And then, suddenly, there was a voice, a prophet, crying out,

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low.*

Can you hear it? That is what hope sounds like. Today, that is what David Merrill sounds like. Second Isaiah, the prophet of hope and restoration, suddenly announces: Comfort, Comfort my people... *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.* They were going home! Isaiah, an astoundingly gifted poet, paints a vivid picture of the future; God would make a way, a way of healing and restoration.

We know all the words. We sing them every Advent season. God will make a way! These are the same verses that Handel chose for the opening lines of *Messiah*. *In the desert prepare the way of the Lord... And every valley shall be lifted up...and the rough places plane.*

Listen to Isaiah, chapter 40, the first eleven verses. The prophet writes:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,*

*that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

A voice cries:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”*

*See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and rules with a mighty arm;
God's reward is with God,
and the Holy recompense before God.
God will feed the flocks like a shepherd;
and gather the lambs in God's arms,
and carry them in God's bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray,

Strong and shepherding God, we are waiting. We've been waiting for a long, long time; waiting for peace, waiting for love that breaks down hostile walls, and light that brightens darkened minds; waiting for peace that always seems at hand, yet never quite arrives. Today we are bold to ask that you would come by here. Move in your Holy Spirit. Move among us; move us to the kind of deep devotion to the Savior love that will transform the grief-hardened parts of ourselves and this world. Come by here, Lord, and grant us peace. Amen.

Home. It is one of the most beautiful words in the English language. There's no place like home. We long for home; we ache for it, Maya Angelou said. Home is "the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."³ But home can be illusive, particularly in our day.

One of my favorite writers, Fred Buechner, told a story of a Christmas sermon he heard once that moved him to tears. The pastor asked the familiar holiday question:

"Are you going home for Christmas?"

Buechner wept because he had no idea where home was.

Many of us wonder that same thing. There are 100 million of us who have no home according to The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates.⁴ Many have no home because of war, famine, or economic circumstances. Some have fled, and others have lost their homes due to ill circumstances. Home just isn't there anymore.

Others will not be home this Christmas because they are serving in the military, or as healthcare providers, first responders, peace workers or mission co-workers.

Please pray for all of them.

Some of us will not be home this Christmas because, like Fred Buechner, we are not sure where home is. Most of us have houses, in some cases fine homes, but are not at home in them. Moves, deaths, divorces, remarriages and illnesses have changed the definition of home.

In the end it is a spiritual question -- Where is home?

By the time the prophet Isaiah sang his homecoming song some of the Hebrew captives didn't remember home. Their sorrow and cynicism caused some of them to assume that God had abandoned them. Some had wandered so far from the faith of home that they couldn't hear the prophet's voice calling out to them to "*Prepare the way of the Lord,*" God is coming, Isaiah said. *Make a highway ... smooth out the rough places ...fill in the potholes.* Get ready! Prepare! God is coming! Either they couldn't hear, or they chose not to respond.

Nevertheless, it was the greatest news of all! And some heard it and returned – some literally returned and some came back spiritually -- when Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians in

538 BC and issued his Emancipation Proclamation calling for the restoration of temples and repatriation of exiled people. Some returned to God, and some did not.

You know, I think there's a reason why Handel's Messiah has become one of the best-known and frequently performed choral works in Western music. This resonates for us. We know what it's like to be exiles.

We need Isaiah's word today. The terrible geo-political events of the last 100 years, suffering brought on by two world wars, numerous genocides, mass shootings, natural disasters and a seemingly endless string of church fights and divisions, have led too many modern people to feel abandoned by God. They conclude that if God is all-powerful then God cannot be all-good, if God is all-good God cannot be all-powerful. Too many have abandoned the church, their spiritual home.

Isaiah says otherwise. Isaiah – this incredibly gifted prophet -- declares that the God who comes is both powerful and good, a gentle God *will feed his flocks like a shepherd; and gather the lambs in his arms*.

Comfort is the opening line of Isaiah's magnificent song. But *nakam* the Hebrew word for comfort means more than soothe or console. It also mean "get ready," "prepare" and "repent" – all concepts that are tied to our sacrament of Baptism, the ancient practice we inherited from John.

You know, every time one of the pastors gathers up a young one in his or her arms and walks them around the sanctuary, we are mimicking that comfort and preparation. And you thought we just wanted to show them off. In fact we are illustrating God's comfort, God's compassion and strength. Isaiah announces the Lord's power when he says that *the Lord GOD will come in might, and rule with a mighty arm*. These children deserve that kind of protection and power; we all do.

Isaiah made the Israelites captives in Babylon to sit up in expectation. He reminds every one of the mighty hand and the outstretched arm of God that led their ancestors out of bondage in Egypt. God is ready to build another highway, Isaiah said. Will you be on it?

Advent is the season of expectation, and we are all exiles. Not so much because of where we live, but because of how we live – isolated, cut off from each other, our spiritual center, our home. In preparation for our Session retreat in January I've been reading Craig Barnes book, *Searching for Home*. Craig, who is president of Princeton Theological Seminary, writes about our suburban lifestyle and how it has evolved from farming and small town communities where people were interdependent and deeply connected; to this new things we call the suburbs. He says:

What the suburbs are good at is keeping people moving. The supermarket...down the road, and the Wal-Mart on a different road...the schools, work, and the tire dealership. ... We live in our cars. ... The automobile is not only a necessity to get to all these places but a means of living in isolation from others. Our houses are built with garages, not porches.

With the help of a new invention called the VISA card, eventually the exiles learn to shop and shop and shop, until those new homes are jam-packed with stuff that can never really satisfy our insatiable appetites. That's because we aren't really looking for stuff. We are looking for home.⁵

Walter Brueggemann, one of the best Biblical teachers in the world, says that the similarities between the exiled communities of the 6th century BC and our own situation are remarkable. Both they and we have experienced the loss of old certainties and foundational assumptions. "Exile is more than geographical," Brueggemann said, "Exile is when old securities are gone and that is where we are living these days."⁶

Here's the good news. According to Isaiah there's a cure for exile...coming home. Barbara Brown Taylor calls it "God's tug at our hearts, a kind of homing instinct planted in each of us."⁷ Come home.

Fred Buechner wept on Christmas because he didn't know where home was. But the answer is not hard. Home is where Christ is. Home is where his people gather, love and depend on one another. Home is where we can belong. Home is where, when you go there they will take you in. Maybe Robert Frost didn't know when he wrote that he was writing about the church – but he was. It's a great description of Christ's welcome.

Come home.

When her family takes a trip, Lisa, an 11-year old with a particularly bright spirit and Down Syndrome, will get up in the morning, look around and announce, "Home now." Her family moved recently. Lisa's early morning announcement that they are "Home now," was a good and important step when her family's new house became "home."

"Home wasn't built in a day," the poster said. True enough, but, in reality, home is anywhere, everywhere love is, everywhere Christ is.

The home where you will always belong, where you will always be welcomed, no matter what, finds its most perfect expression in a simple stable in Bethlehem, where the gentle, comforting, and mighty power of God took on human flesh and blood to save us from our isolation, and all our despair and pain. He is our home. He is where we are headed this Advent season...home.

¹ Psalm 44:18-19

² Psalm 137:1-4

³ Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Vintage, 1991, 196

⁴ This is an old number. The last time the United Nation did a thorough count of the world homeless population was 2005. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx>

⁵ M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*, Brazos Press, 2003, 46-47

⁶ Walter Brueggemann by John Buchanan in a sermon "

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley, 1993, 164-5