

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

By Andrew Wilson

Jeremiah 31:7-11

Galatians 4:4-7

Often when I'm teaching an adult class I'll begin by asking people to tell where they grew up. It always seems to turn out as we go around the room that about half of the people grew up within ten miles or so of the Crescenta Valley. And there's always someone among that group who says something like: "Yep, I'm one of those boring people who never went anywhere."

It seems to me that we tend to exaggerate the value of travel and of living in multiple locations. We think our lives would be greatly improved by a tour of India, or by a three-year assignment in New York City. But that cuts against the grain of our collective human experience. Most of what we need to become virtuous and happy is available to us right here, in the place where we currently live. Furthermore, if we're having trouble becoming virtuous and happy under our own roof, it's very unlikely that we're going to remedy that problem by traveling to India or moving to New York. God can work with us anywhere, but he usually prefers to teach us within the confines of home.

The American philosopher and theologian, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was skeptical of the impulse to travel. Those who travel, he said, seek a fool's paradise. They learn very little of importance that they could not have learned in their own neighborhood. Emerson writes [PAPER]:

They who made England, Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination, did so by sticking fast where they were... He who travels to be amused, or to get [something that] he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things. ["Self-Reliance"]

There's a lot to be said for putting down roots and staying put. We tend to underestimate the value of living in community with family and friends. Life is richer and fuller for people whose friendships last a lifetime and whose childhood memories are attached to one place.

I spent my childhood in many different places. In fact, by the time I entered high school I had already lived in six different cities in five different states. I had also attended seven different schools. I changed schools more frequently than some kids change their socks. I don't regret the experiences I've had; I was supremely happy as a child. But I do wonder sometimes what my life would be like – how different I would be as a person – if I had had one place to call home throughout my life.

One of the things I learned, moving around so much, is that it's possible to feel at home in more than one place in the world. For example, I always feel at home when I'm eating with my parents in Arcadia, or with Mary's dad in Gates Mills, Ohio. I feel at home when I'm performing a wedding for friends in Kansas City, or when I'm sipping coffee in the dining hall at the Haitian Missionary Baptist Church La Romana.

Home is usually associated with the people who are close to us. You're at home in any place where you love others deeply, and they return that love with no strings attached. A cynic once said: "Home is where people go when they're tired of being nice." But Robert Frost's observation is more to the point. Frost wrote: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have

to take you in.” For the past 120 years, this church has been a home away from home for hundreds of people, including a great many of you.

Most homes are populated by family and friends. But another thing I’ve discovered as I’ve moved here and there is that not every home is like that. There are certain wild and beautiful places in the world – places we’ve known since our youth – where we feel at home even when we’re alone. I think of a particular lake that I first discovered in the third grade. Even today, as I stand on its shore, it practically begs me to throw in my fishing line. I think of a particular canyon above Arcadia that I’ve been walking through for more than thirty years. I have the sense, whenever I visit, that every rock and every tree I encounter is glad to see me. As we saw last week, God sometimes calls us to make our home with him in the wilderness. Our experience of His joy and peace on those occasions is only enhanced by our solitude.

For most of us, Christmas is a homeward journey. Everything about the season calls to mind the happiest of childhood memories, all of them associated with home. That’s true of the foods we eat, the decorations we display, the parties we throw and the songs we sing. We each cling to our Christmas traditions in the hope that they will take us back home. What we sometimes call “Christmas nostalgia” is really a homesickness - a longing for home – that isn’t easily satisfied.

Our longing is poignantly expressed in song lyrics:

“There’s no place like home for the holidays.”

“I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.”

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know...”

I learned recently that “White Christmas” is the most popular song ever written. It has been recorded more, played more, and listen to more than any other song in history. Even before it was recorded, Irving Berlin knew that his song was going to be a huge hit. In fact, the morning after he wrote it, Berlin reportedly said to his colleagues: “Well, fellas, I just wrote the best song in the history of the world!”

“White Christmas” was released in 1941, at the beginning of the American involvement in the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were separated from their families and were facing dangers and privations that intensified their longing for home. Berlin’s song addressed that longing, and gave encouragement to every soldier’s hope for peace on earth. Sadly, our world is still torn apart by war. We still pray for soldiers deployed to the far corners of the globe. We still mourn the deaths of many of our best and brightest. We still long for a world at peace.

The prophet Jeremiah also lived in a time of war. Jeremiah’s calling was so dangerous and demanding that God prohibited him from marrying and having a family. He began his ministry in the year 626 BC as the Assyrian Empire was crumbling and the Babylonian Empire was on the rise. At great risk to himself, Jeremiah lashed out against the sins of his countrymen and told them of God’s judgment against them. God would undo everything he had done for his people since the day he brought them out of Egypt. Judah would be attacked and overrun by the most powerful nation in the world, and the people would be carried off to Babylon.

Jeremiah then had the misfortune of having to watch his horrific prophecies come true. The Egyptians were crushed by the Babylonians, the people of Judah continued to worship foreign gods, and Jerusalem was attacked. After a period of horrible suffering, in the year 586 BC, the city fell; the temple, the palace, and all the houses of the city were burned; and the city walls were destroyed. Then almost every citizen in Judah was hauled across the desert with their king, Zedekiah, to Babylon.

The Exile, as it's called, lasted seventy years. A whole generation of people grew up and died in Babylon. It was a generation that longed for home, told stories of the good old days in Jerusalem, and sang songs about the mother country. In their worst moments, they wondered if God cared about them any more, and if He had abandoned them for good. But there were always some in their midst who remembered the hopeful words spoken by Jeremiah, and by Isaiah before him. They would take out the sacred scrolls and encourage the people with passages like this one from Jeremiah, chapter 31 [BIBLE]:

*“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations...
He who scattered Israel will gather them,
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’
For the Lord will ransom Jacob
and redeem them from the hand
of those stronger than they...”*
[Jeremiah 31:10-11]

Isaiah picks up the same theme in his song [BIBLE]:

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And proclaim to her
that her hard service
has been completed...
“Make straight in the [desert]
a highway for our God!”*
[Isaiah 40:1, 3]

Those are homecoming songs. God hasn't forgotten Israel. God remembers his people and he's hatching a plan to break their bondage. He will lead them across the desert highway in a great triumphant homecoming parade. They're as weak as lambs, but God is a Shepherd who has them in his sight. They're deserving of God's continued wrath, but God chooses to love them. God is going to fulfill his covenant promise to bring his people home.

The New Testament tells us of another kind of homecoming. According to Paul, Jesus was sent to us so that we might have the opportunity to become God's adopted sons and daughters, the heirs of his heavenly kingdom. As we just saw, the home that God gave to Israel was geographical. But the home that God gives us, through Christ, is spiritual.

Paul writes [BIBLE]:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman... to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

[Galatians 4:4-7]

Paul is speaking to all of us who love Christ and have surrendered our hearts to him. He's telling us that our exile is over. Christ has broken the chains that enslave us, the chains of our sin. As a result, we've become part of God's family. And the evidence of our family connection is the Spirit of Jesus alive in us. That Spirit enables us to cry out to God as a child cries out and declares her love for her papa. Home, by Paul's way of thinking, is wherever Christ's spirit is alive. Home is the place where we know ourselves to be accepted and cared for and never forgotten.

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in keeping their homemade plane aloft for fifty-nine seconds. All those years of work had paid off. They had proven their critics wrong, and they were overjoyed!

In their excitement, the Wright brothers rushed a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio. She was so excited about the news that she immediately took the telegram to the newspaper and gave it to the editor. The brothers' simple message was: "First sustained flight today fifty-nine seconds. Hope to be home by Christmas." The next morning the Wright brothers' name was splashed across the front page. The headline read: "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants to Be Home for Holidays."

That editor missed one of the biggest news stories of the 20th century even though the telegram he received spelled it out for him in plain English. Similarly, each December many people miss the main point of Christmas. They come home for the holidays to feast and sing and exchange gifts. But somehow, in the midst of the excitement, they forget the message of love and forgiveness expressed through the birth of God's only begotten Son.

The celebration of Christmas feeds our deep longing to go home to our Father. It reminds us that we're exiles living in a war-torn world. The glorious message isn't that we've arrived, but rather, that God hasn't left us alone. God sent his Son, Jesus, to make his home with us, and to free us from our bondage to sin and death. The home to which we must return is there, at that simple stable where God proved his great love for us. That's where we're heading; that's where God is leading us this Christmas: to that place where his hope, peace, joy and love all come together. Home.

*Lord Jesus, in this season of longing
we acknowledge that the only lasting peace
comes from knowing you,
and seeking first your kingdom.
Bring us home, Lord, to the place of your birth,
And open our eyes to see your glory.
Help us to put your teachings into action
and to love you with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.
We pray in the name of the child
born in Bethlehem, our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*