

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Coming Home”

Rev. David K. Groth

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“He who goes out weeping . . . shall come home with shouts of joy” (Ps. 126:6).

One of the worst things that could happen to anybody happened. People were removed from their homes, lined up, and marched across the desert. Behind them they could see the smoke rising from their beautiful city in flames, their holy temple, Jerusalem, their home. Ahead of them is the land of Babylon. They were told bluntly their past is gone. You are no longer Jews. You have no home to which to return. Get used to it. Your home is no more.

It's one of the worst things that can happen and it happens today. For political and sometimes religious reasons, whole populations are removed from their homes and resettled in wretched refugee camps: Sudan, Darfur, Zimbabwe. This year, the worst drought in 60 years in Eastern Africa sent hundreds of thousands of refugees to a miserable camp in Kenya where they were greeted with cholera, and diarrhea, and malnutrition. Sometimes refugees live in such camps for years, decades even, all the while longing for home, yearning for it, hoping one day to return, keeping among their valuables the key to the door of the home they lived in.

In Monday's newspaper there was an article about the plight of Christians throughout the Middle East. With the Arab Spring and the toppling of autocratic rulers, Islamic political parties are filling the vacuum, and with that there often comes unbridled violence against Christians. Indeed, it's already happening. Since the fall of Sadaam Hussein in Iraq, 54 Iraqi churches have been bombed, just one sign of the persecution happening there. Therefore, Iraqi Christians are fleeing their homes. In 2003, there were 1.4 million Christians in Iraq. Today, there are less than 500,000. Christians everywhere in the Middle East are worried that life under Islamic rule will be far worse than life under the autocrats they replaced.

Losing your home and homeland is one of the worst things that can happen. When it happened to God's people, when they were forced into Babylonian exile, it was not just a military and political catastrophe. It became a theological crisis. How could this happen to God's chosen people? Has He forgotten us? Is He still our protector and defender? Has he abandoned His covenant with us? They are homeless and homesick.

Psalms 137 gives us a poignant description of their homesickness. “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us 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 . . .” The psalm concludes with white-hot anger. “O Babylon . . . blessed shall he be who repays you for what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” It's so angry, so appalling, we wish it were not there and we almost never read it out loud.

Through the prophets God had given plenty of fair warning, nearly begging the people to turn from their sin and avoid this catastrophe. “Come now, let us reason together” God says in Isaiah. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; if you refuse and rebel, you *shall* be eaten by the sword” (1:18ff).

The people didn’t listen, didn’t repent, and the anger of the Lord burned against them. Only when they were thoroughly laid low by the Law were they ready to hear the Gospel. Only when their own cups were made empty, was the Lord able to fill them again something good. “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out . . . I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered . . . I will gather them . . . and will bring them into their own land . . . I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land . . . on the mountains of Israel” (Ezek. 34:11ff). When you hear those words, maybe you too think of the image of Jesus carrying that lost lamb on his shoulders, restoring it to the flock, bringing it home.

Psalm 126 which we read earlier was also written for the exiles. “Those who go out weeping . . . shall come home with shouts of joy”; “our mouths will be filled with laughter.”

Last year, we went to the international concourse of O’Hare Airport to pick up Sara Fernandez, our AFS student. We got there plenty early, and so, as we waited we watched a lot of people coming home. It was really quite moving: fathers and mothers, still in fatigues, walking down the hall of the concourse, then jogging, then, having made eye contact, running, and the moment of reunion with tears and kisses and embraces and applause . . . so glad to be home again. We saw what were presumably exchange students bearing heavy backpacks, dragging large suitcases, embracing their parents. I saw what looked like a business traveler sharing a short kiss but a long, swaying hug with his spouse.

Then there’s the homecoming music: “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Coming for to Carry Me Home” and at this time of the year “I’ll Be Home for Christmas, If Only in My Dreams” and “There’s No Place like Home for the Holidays.” And “Home” by Michael Buble: “Another summer day has come and gone away in Paris and Rome, but I wanna go home. Maybe surrounded by a million people I still feel all alone. I just wanna go home.” And the oldest homecoming music of all: “Comfort, comfort my people. Prepare the way. Every valley shall be lifted up and every hill made low.” You’re going home.

This time of year Garrison Keillor likes to talk about the exiles coming home to Lake Wobegone for Christmas. Most of them weren’t planning on coming home. “But Christmas exerts powerful forces” he writes. “We turn a corner in a wretched shopping mall and some bars of a [Christmas] tune turn a switch on in our heads and gates open and tons of water thunder through Hoover Dam, the big turbines spin, electricity flows and we get in our car and we [go home]” (Leaving Home, pp. 181-183).

I know even my college student will be glad to sleep in her own bed and eat home cooked meals and curl up next to Benno and watch the Packers. But I also know that after a period of time she starts feeling homesick again . . . for her little dorm room and campus life. I think that’s good?

Probably all of us have competing ideas of where home really is. In the end, it's not the address you put on your Christmas cards. It's not the place you had before you had to move into an apartment. It's not the address of your childhood. Your true home is where Christ is. That's where we belong. That's where we want to be. If home is the place where you are loved most, then home is where Christ is.

Many of you remember Earl Oestreich. He lived all his life under the same roof . . . 85 years in a farm house next to the river off of County E. In fact, at the end of his life he was still sleeping in the same room in which he was born. Can you imagine? Just days before Earl died, it became clear he could no longer stay at the farm and was moved into residential hospice care. I was worried about that, how the move would go and asked his son about it. He said as they pulled out of the driveway Earl never looked back. He simply waved his hand and said "Goodbye farm." And it was with a great sense of relief, actually. It was an old farmhouse in need of constant repairs with barns and sheds also needing attention. There were bills on the counter in the kitchen and projects half-done. So as they pulled out, all that was lifted from Earl's shoulders. Though he lived there all his life, Earl knew that drafty old farm house really wasn't his home. God had a much better home in mind. If home is where you are loved the most, then home is where Christ is.

Friends, you are not yet home. You are as much on the move as was old Jacob, whom the Lord calls a "wandering Aramean." You are as much a nomadic people as were God's ancient people wandering in the desert for 40 years. You are further away from your true home than were those exiles in Babylon. You are not yet home. But you do know the way to get there, don't you. "I am the Way" said Jesus.

I pray the Holy Spirit always stirs up within you a sense of homesickness, that sense of yearning for the New Jerusalem. We see it in Ps. 42, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?"(vv. 1-2). We see it in the words of Augustine, "Our hearts are restless Lord, until they rest in thee." We see it in the parable of the prodigal son. When he finally decides to come home, he returns empty handed, with nothing to point to but sin and failure and shame. He returns in part because he has no where else to go. There are no other options out there. He returns hungry and filthy, smelling of pigs. He returns wondering what kind of reception he will receive, expecting the worse, expecting at least a major dressing down; maybe he will even be disowned. But he returns to see the Father running down the road. He returns to the Father's embrace, the Father's welcome. In plain sight of everyone, the Father restores him as a son and escorts him into the celebration.

That, in the end, is what we're going home to as well. We're going home, to where Jesus is.

His first home was a dusty stall, cob webs clinging to every corner, dry manure here and there, maybe some that was fresh. Then fleeing to Egypt, a political refugee, then, when it was safe, out of Egypt to Nazareth, where he would grow up to adulthood. Then, remembering those words from Scripture about the shepherd gathering the lambs, leading them home, he leaves Nazareth, and becomes an itinerant preacher and teacher, as much a nomad for the duration of his years as his forefathers Abraham and Jacob. Foxes have their holes and the birds their nests, but the Son of Man had no place to lay his head (Mt. 8:20). The disciples really didn't know where

he was going, where he was taking them. They didn't know the way. But he did. There was a cross waiting for him in Jerusalem, pulling at him, tugging at his heart. That was the Way. A cross on which he would die so you and I might one day have a home.

We are coming home to a place where we will be most welcome, a place that has been expecting us, is even now preparing for us, a place where we will be known and forever safe . . . a place where He is, Jesus, who loves us more, and from whose love nothing will ever separate us. Amen.