

WHEN WE GET HOME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 4, 2009

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14; II Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10

I don't know about you but this year I experienced an after-Christmas slump. I suppose it was the warming up of the weather, having had an arctic blast the week before, followed by a rainy and warm Christmas Eve. I spent a few days writing thank you notes and sending out late Christmas cards, thinking about the year ahead and the year just past, but the grey days didn't do much for my spirits.

Nothing is as over as Christmas when it's over. And even the follow up holiday of New Year's doesn't really match the buildup that has been coming for months. I guess that's why the church takes its time in saying goodbye to this season of Christmastide. Tuesday marks Epiphany, Twelfth Night, so we squeeze just a little more out of the Christmas decorations and keep the white paraments one more Sunday to signal our reluctance to return to the drab green of Ordinary Time as the church counts it.

Epiphany is the season of the revealing of the light, the uncovering of what has until this time been left a secret, the coming of the One who is God's beloved child, Jesus.

So, of course, Jeremiah's words meet our ears gladly,

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations, proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel."

It sounds like an appropriate song of praise and thanksgiving for such an occasion as the birth of the One who will indeed save the people, Jesus, the One whose birth we have just celebrated.

The only problem is that Jeremiah is a Sixth Century BC prophet writing in a time of deep darkness and great gloom for Israel. Called to be a prophet in 627 BC, Jeremiah had seen King Josiah killed in battle by the Egyptians, Assyria reassert its control over Israel, and then in 597 BC he saw Babylon enter Jerusalem, occupy the city and take into exile its king and queen mother and many of Israel's most prominent leaders.

From a prison cell in 587 BC he heard the news that Babylon had laid siege to the Holy City of Jerusalem, starved it, and finally destroyed it.

In that context, listen again to his words,

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations, proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel."

Now Jeremiah's song sounds more like a call to courage, a voice crying in the wilderness, an encouragement against the harsh realities of a world in which none of his best hopes for his people seemed achievable, except by faith.

I suppose we might have expected this from Jeremiah, this counter voice against the harsh realities of the world. The prophets are, after all, the Polar Bear Club of the Bible.

These are the folks who are predicting earthquake, fire and judgment when the skies are blue and the earth seems sweet. When it is day they are bemoaning the darkness of night. When the water is coldest and most frozen they are the ones most likely to chop a hole in the ice, strip down to their Speedos and take a dive in the water, just to demonstrate that things are never what they seem. Prophets like Jeremiah are always sounding the strident note, the least likely message in the time most out of sorts.

So Ronald Clements in his commentary on Jeremiah says, "What we have here is the literary deposit outlining the message of hope derived from Jeremiah's conviction given in the hour of Judah's deepest crisis..."¹

Think here of the clown from the Big Apple Circus who goes into the pediatric cancer ward at Sloane Kettering, and you have something of the absurdity of what Jeremiah is doing by calling Israel to celebrate in the midst of national exile and state crisis.

Only a visionary with expansive hope could expect anything so monumental as a full restoration of Israel to Mt. Zion even as the flames of Jerusalem burning are still bronzing the sky. But that is exactly what Jeremiah envisions,

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. ...I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.

I suppose Jeremiah's words of hope and encouragement borne of nothing more than a profound trust and hope in God was precisely the positive perspective that Israel needed. It was, after all, "the hour of Judah's deepest crisis."

And there are parallels with our own time as well, not that we are a defeated nation, not by a long shot, nor are we in the depths of the kind of despair that Israel knew in the 6th Century BC, our enemies having destroyed our most honored cities. But these are not the best of days for our nation, nonetheless.

I have been thinking of the challenge that our new President is facing. A Middle East that is fanning the flames of war, with Palestinians lobbing rockets across Gaza into Israel, and Israel now in Gaza for what Ehud Barak says will be an extended war. The collateral damage of civilian deaths is running in the hundreds now. Iran is closing in on nuclear capacity and since Mumbai, Pakistan and India are on each other's nerves.

The economy is broken, and no one is quite sure how to fix it. The auto industry is failing, and even Honda has dropped out of the top ten in customer satisfaction. Now

the growing numbers of people who are unemployed are draining the social safety coffers at a time when the government is least able to cope with higher costs and less income. It is expected that the unemployment rate has now hit ten percent. And in case anyone has forgotten, we are still waging two wars at the same time in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

It seems like we are far from home and have no idea how to get back, back to that place where we are safe and secure again, that place where rejoicing and gladness are, and hope resides. It is, I suppose, why Jeremiah's words struck such a resounding note in the hearts of the exiles who first heard him speak of it. What he promised was that soon Israel would go home and life would go on, and not from exile.

There is something in all of us that wants to get back home, wherever home is, to that place of long ago, and growing up, or that place of not so long ago when things were different than they are now and certain people were present and health was more definite, or seemed less at risk than it does today. Home, that place where you always felt secure. Home, that place that Robert Frost once said, "If you have to go there, they have to take you in."

A friend reminded me of a popular commercial that shows during the holidays. It shows a college aged boy making his way home through the snow one early morning. He finally hitches a ride to the doorstep of a classic suburban two story house. Its dawn and he quietly tip-toes into the house. You can see the look of anticipation on his face for reunion with his family.

How shall he wake them? A call from downstairs would startle everyone. He could just wait until someone makes it out of bed in due course. But finally he spots the can of Maxwell House on the counter. As the coffee brews, the rich smell wafts up the stairs awakening the family to his arrival. Hugs and kisses ensue.²

Whatever ad agency thought that one up got into the tap root of a longing that we all have. The desire for reunion, and the gentle reawakening that binds us to loved ones whom we have longed to see.

It is no surprise, I suppose that the most beloved of all American pastimes is a sport whose object is to leave and return to home safely. Baseball is that game whose object enacts the great desire of us all, not simply to leave home, but also to return there.

This Sunday, the text is about homecoming. Jeremiah brings us word that there is life to be found outside of our homes.³ We can do it, you know. Build houses, plant gardens, put up a roof, but know also that in doing so we are only biding time, making the best we can of what we have before us. There is life beyond the home we left and the home we make for awhile, just not the life or home intended for us finally. That kind of completeness is only found when we are at home inside ourselves, at home in our heart and hopes, and finally at home with God.

This is one of the strongest desires we ever know. To make and keep a home somewhere, if only within us.

St. Paul picks up this theme when he writes to the Corinthians, expressing a similar thought so delicately that you almost miss it if you are not watching for it.

We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens. [and]... we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith and not by sight.

What Paul suggests is that on earth there will always be a sense of incompleteness in life. We are, after all, not yet home, with the Lord. But when we are, one day, at home again with God from whom we came, there will no longer be any sense of incompleteness. For being with God we will at last be at home.

A minister friend whom I know was once asked what it will be like when we die, “What is the life hereafter like?” And the answer he gave was, “It will be like it was before we were born, when we were still in the womb.”

The truth is that we long to be at home and we are not there yet. But the hope that Jeremiah offers is that we will get home at last. We will see better days, we will return to Jerusalem and worship on Zion. We will prosper and flourish and be different when we do. And it will be good, even as we will be good; safe and at home.

Maybe in the last instance home is not so much a place as it is a state of mind. It has been some years since I went back home for a long look at the place where I grew up in St. Joseph, Missouri. I have carried so many memories of that town for so long. The football field where I used to work out in the summer, running up and down the stadium aisles in the steamy August heat of Missouri. The downtown stores that used to be there that are now mostly gone or boarded up. The busy streets that I remember have grass growing in them in the breaks in macadam because there is so little traffic on them. The old landmarks of the city, the Rubidoux Hotel, old barber shop where Magee cut my hair as a boy, the old house of Jesse James a tourist trap, have been relocated or torn down and other buildings have taken their place.

It’s not home any more, not the way it used to be. But it doesn’t make any difference, not really. Because that home is still inside me, still there even if I cannot go there and see it the way it was. It’s still there in my memory. My mother is still baking bread for the holidays in that old house on Ashland Avenue, and we’re still setting the table for my brother to come home from the Naval Academy that first year he went away.

So home, at long last, may not be a place, so much as a journey to a place, the place where God is.

Tom Hunter, who was a classmate of mine in college died this past June, but he was a wonderful folk singer and song writer, who put this idea so well when he sang,

But what if we can’t get there?

What if it’s too far?

What if we find our way from right here where we are?

What if it doesn't matter
that we can't find our star?
What if God comes anyway
right here where we are?

The traditional story of Epiphany is the story of the Wise Ones, the Magi, those elegant and mysterious ones who came from far away to worship at the cradle of the newborn king. Tradition has it that they arrived a few months after Jesus' birth, not necessarily on Christmas night the way we like to picture it.

But in a sense, of course, they were there anyway because it was the place to which they were going, the place they longed to be, no matter how long it took to get there.

And so it is for all of us making our way in life, making our way home, making our way into this new year. And the truth is that on earth we will always be to some extent away from home, for our ultimate home is with God, who waits for our return, like a father keeping watch for a prodigal, like a mother who would gather her brood under her wing.

On this first Sunday of a new year, we remember home, and the yearning that we have for it and the leaning of our spirits in its direction and our desire to find it for a time somewhere, where we are. Jeremiah tells us not to worry too much about all of that, for we *will* find our way home, and one day we will be all the way home again with God. For where God is, is always home.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2009.

¹ R.E. Clements, **Jeremiah**. Interpretation Bible Commentary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989. 174.

² Doug King, Moveable Feast paper on this text for the 2008 Moveable Feast.

³ The remainder of this paragraph is a rephrasing of Doug King's words in his paper on this text given at the Moveable Feast, 2008, unpublished.