

# HOME

Psalm 132

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Christ the King Sunday      November 25, 2018

*(This sermon owes a considerable debt to an exegetical paper on the Psalm text written by Patrick Willson for the January 2006 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Danville, California.)*

In one of his autobiographical essays, Frederick Buechner recalled a turning point in his life. The year was 1953, and Buechner was still single, living here in New York and trying to write a novel “which for one reason or another refused to come to life.” Next door to his apartment there happened to be a church – the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church – whose pastor was a man named George Buttrick. Depressed as he was about his novel and with time heavy on his hands, Buechner started going to hear Buttrick preach, because he found him well worth the hearing... given what Buechner described as Buttrick’s “oddly ragged eloquence and... the way he could take words you had heard all your life and make you hear them and the holiness in them as though for the first time.”

It was in the middle of December that he said something in a sermon that has always stayed with me. He said that on the previous Sunday, as he was leaving the church to go home, he happened to overhear somebody out on the steps asking somebody else, “Are you going home for Christmas?” and [said Buechner] I can almost see Buttrick with his glasses glittering in the lectern light as he peered out at all those people listening to him in that large, dim sanctuary and asked it again – “Are you going home for Christmas?” – and asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to my eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.<sup>1</sup>

There is something about the holidays, I think – something about the month-or-so of days that began Thursday on Thanksgiving and will continue until Christmas – something that stirs in us memories of home, and maybe even a *longing* for home... for the old and familiar spaces, and for the people who inhabit or inhabited them, even if they are better in our memories than they ever were in reality.

Some of us are young enough to remember our first months away at college, and doubtless can remember well how homesickness sneaked in at times to surprise and startle...but it’s not just during the first undergraduate year that it happens; it can happen anytime. A graduating senior in Chapel Hill told me several years ago how she dreaded the “real world,” and how she wished she could go back and just be a child at home again. I told her that even in my dotage I sometimes feel the same way. Such a longing

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*, San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 1996, 24-25. Thanks to Tom Are for pointing me to this essay.

for home is part and parcel of the lives most of us live... for as long as we live. Sometimes it is the longing for a particular place, with the familiar sights and sounds and scents and comforts that made it home. More often it is some aching for a family now separated by miles or by death or by hardship or by deep divides and hurts... the family we once knew and miss so palpably.

For many in this world, such a notion of home is a matter of longing, but not of experience. I think of Central American refugees, many of them on the move, some risking their lives in the hands of unscrupulous “transporters,” in search of some safe place away from fear that will let them in and give them a chance to make a home. And I think of the obstacles so many of them face in seeing such hopes through to fulfillment in these days, largely because of other people’s fears. Those seeking asylum in this country are less and less sure they will be able to come at all. And so, they wait, wrestling with a dream deferred. Strangers and sojourners – the very ones the teachings of both Torah and Gospel command us to welcome.

I think of fire victims in California, completely displaced from their homes, from their decimated communities. And though they escaped with their lives, unlike so many in places where the fire advanced with lightning speed, their lives are forever altered and, in many ways, displaced.

I think of countless young adults who have made their way to this city in search of – what, exactly? Success? A start on a career? A break? I think of the loneliness of life in the city, where eyes rarely meet on the sidewalks, and people don’t know the names of those who inhabit the apartments on either side. Are you going home for Christmas?

The notion of home is complex at times. I think of Emily Scheck, a sophomore cross country athlete at Canisius College up in Buffalo, who shared with her mother news of a love in her life – a love who happened to be another young woman on the team – and who was then given an ultimatum: come home and get treatment or be banished from the family. NBC News reported this week that the NCAA will allow Ms. Scheck to keep her eligibility after a teammate organized a GoFundMe account that raised more than \$60,000 to help with her ongoing college expenses.<sup>2</sup> Good news, I guess, but sad news at best, as yet another young person is cut off from home.

The notion of home is complex at times. I think of Fay Wells, an African-American woman who is vice president for strategy at a Los Angeles-based company. In the *Washington Post* a few years back, she told of an evening when she locked herself out of her Santa Monica apartment. She did what any of us might do; she called a locksmith, and he came and unlocked her door. A short while later, nineteen uniformed officers surrounded her apartment and demanded at gunpoint that she leave her home, while they searched it. A neighbor had called 911 to report a possible break-in. Wells wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/ncaa-athlete-disowned-family-able-keep-gofundme-donations-n938021>, accessed November 23, 2018.

It didn't matter that I told the cops I'd lived there for seven months, told them about the locksmith, offered to show a receipt for his services and my ID. It didn't matter that I went to Duke, that I have an MBA from Dartmouth, that I'm a vice president ... at a multinational corporation. It didn't matter that I've never had so much as a speeding ticket. It didn't matter that I calmly, continually asked them what was happening. It also didn't matter that I didn't match the description of the person they were looking for — my neighbor described me as Hispanic when he called 911. What mattered was that I was a woman of color trying to get into her apartment — in an almost entirely white apartment complex in a mostly white city — and a white man who lived in another building called the cops.

After the officers searched and eventually “cleared” her apartment, Wells was allowed back in, unharmed, but the trauma of that night left her shaken.

I'm heartbroken that [my neighbor's] careless assessment of me, based on skin color, could endanger my life. I'm heartbroken by the sense of terror I got from people whose job is supposedly to protect me.... *I'm heartbroken that the place I called home no longer feels safe.* I'm heartbroken that no matter how many times a story like this is told, it will happen again.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course, many similar stories, and many other stories – of those with mental illness, forced to wander the streets, with no safe place to lay their heads – of those who are the victims of abuse in their own homes, but who lack the resources or the courage to move out. So many stories. So much fear. So much longing for home. Those of us who live in relative tranquility cannot imagine the strain of wanting, needing, and not finding a safe place to call home. We cannot imagine it.

The scriptures, too, seem full of descriptions of people in search of home – Abraham and Sarah and Abraham's family, wandering through the desert; the Hebrew slaves in their Exodus struggles; exiles who find it hard to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land; the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews who considered themselves “strangers and foreigners on the earth,” always in search of a homeland. The longing for home lodges deep in the human psyche, and with it, a longing for God. “You have made us for Yourself,” prayed St. Augustine in the Fourth Century – “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

Such restlessness and longing for home are integral to our human identity. They find their expression in many ways, but in the scriptures they find a particular locus in what are known as the “pilgrim psalms” – songs for people on the move toward home. These psalms are, as Patrick Willson says, “traveling music for people on their way to [home with] God.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/18/my-white-neighbor-thought-i-was-breaking-into-my-own-apartment-nineteen-cops-showed-up/>, accessed November 18, 2015. Italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Willson, in a paper on this psalm presented to the January 2006 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Danville, California. This sermon owes its exegetical direction and much of its substance to that paper.

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” sings the 122<sup>nd</sup> psalm, [one] of these pilgrim psalms. They wanted to go to the house of the Lord; they wanted to go home. Worshippers made their way to the Temple in Jerusalem annually, it seems, and these pilgrim psalms (or songs of ascent, for going *up* Mount Zion) supplied music not only for their journey but also for their celebrations once they arrived at their destination. Not all of these pilgrim psalms are so ebullient and glad about going to the house of the Lord, however....

...For people then, as now, journeying to God was not a straightforward, uncomplicated business. They journeyed with joy and heartache, with hope and with the fear that all their hopes might amount to nothing. Packing on their backs the weight of hope and bearing the risk of disappointment, they made their journey, and on their way, they sang their songs.

Like [other nostalgic songs, our psalm today, the 132<sup>nd</sup> psalm,] yearns for a home, a home remembered from days gone by, home with God and in God, a home yearned for and prayed for.<sup>5</sup>

Together the people recall and sing to God about how life for them as a people used to be, and they call on God to remember as well. “O Lord,” they sing, “remember in David’s favor all the hardships he endured” in building a tabernacle where the people could gather with God. They sing of that place where what was broken could be mended and what was wrong could be made right. “Home is where you can bring your hurts. Home with God is where the healing happens.” They remember and they sing.<sup>6</sup>

“The tenor section picks up the psalm” now, remembering how it once was. They sing of the Ark of the Covenant, the visible sign of God’s presence, and remember carrying it into the tabernacle. They remember, and they pray, “Rise up, O Lord, and go to your resting place.” That phrase, “resting place,” speaks once more of home. They pray that God will be there, and they are on a journey based on such a hope, but they wonder. After all, all the visible reminders of God’s presence in the past were gone. The dynasty David had built was no more than an enchanting remembrance, and the Temple, Solomon’s grand temple, lay in ruins. They would gladly worship even among the Temple ruins, but they wonder if God will be there.

Then, says Willson, just when their song seems most heartbreakingly poignant, another voice interrupts their melody:

This voice does not sing of what must be remembered, and it does not sing of what must be done and has not been done, and it does not propose any sort of [requirement], but chants a new promise, a new and open future and a deep yearning, deeper even than the pilgrim’s yearning. The voice is God’s...and [it rings with] unqualified promises.

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<sup>5</sup> Willson.

<sup>6</sup> This entire description of the flow of the psalm draws heavily upon Willson’s paper.

“This is my resting place” – this is my home – “forever; here I will reside” – here I will make my home – “for I have desired it.” In spite of the ruins of the Temple, in spite of the ruins of our lives, God declares, “Here I will make a home.” In spite of all the [conditional loyalties and failings] of David’s children... God announces, “Here I will make a home.”<sup>7</sup>

And why does God do so? Why? “For I have desired it,” God says. “I have *desired* it.” What a startling assertion! Just as *we* long for home, God longs for home, too. And so, God makes a home. Where? God makes a home among the people, “among those who journey toward God, yearn for God, wonder about God, pray to God, sometimes want to give up on God, but are here nonetheless.”<sup>8</sup> Here I will make a home, says the Lord, for I have desired it. And so, the pilgrim is invited to come. Once here, once home, all the pilgrim has to do is trust. All the other verbs are “I” verbs from God: “I will abundantly bless... I will satisfy the poor... I will clothe...” Once home, the only task of the pilgrim is to trust. God will provide the rest... here in God’s home.<sup>9</sup>

If it seems too odd to speak of God’s longing for home on this last Sunday of the Christian year, Patrick Willson says that maybe we should think back to the very beginning of our year, to the promise of an angel, whispered in a dream, “They shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.” On this last Sunday of the church year, we are bold to claim the promise of the angel’s announcement; and we can also remember how the story of God and God’s people turns out at the end of the scriptures. A loud voice calls from the throne, saying, “Behold, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s peoples.” Because God has desired it, has longed for it, from the very beginning. The reign of Christ is our dwelling place...and our home.

On this last Sunday of the church year, I can think of no more important promise than that one, and no more fortifying thought than that *our* longing for home in these days is met and matched by God’s longing, and that what we both long for the most – in the end – is each other.

And if that be the case, people of God, should it not then open our hearts and our arms to all those who are struggling to find home in these days?

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<sup>7</sup> Willson.

<sup>8</sup> Willson.

<sup>9</sup> Christine Roy Yoder made such an observation at the same meeting of the Moveable Feast, January 2006, in Danville, California.