

Isaiah 43:1-7

“The Longing for Home”

November 27, 2011 First Sunday of Advent Maple Grove UMC

Once there was a way to get back home. . . The song is from the Beatles’ Abbey Road album, which came out in 1969. It expresses the longing of a generation at the end of one of the most turbulent decades in our history. Woodstock and the Viet Nam War, Women’s Lib and the Generation Gap. For good or ill, everyone knew the world would never be the same again. And at the end of the decade came this plaintive cry: Once there was a way to get back home . . .

But here’s what you probably didn’t know about that Beatles song. Paul McCartney based it on a poem written by dramatist Thomas Dekker . . . in 1603. Maybe the longing for home goes back farther than the 1960s.

In fact, here’s how longing for home sounded in the sixth century BC for the people of Israel in exile. It’s from Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

So universal is the longing for home, notes Frederick Buechner, there's even a special word for it--'homesickness.'ⁱ Sometimes we're homesick for a place: a city or country you love, the house you grew up in, the Temple in Jerusalem now destroyed. Sometimes we're homesick for people: when the kids go away to college, if the grandkids move far away, for mama gone all these years. And sometimes we're homesick for something you can't quite name and don't even know you're missing until you find it.

As I think I've already shared with you, preacher Barbara Taylor gets it just right.ⁱⁱ The neighborhood where you have lived all your life begins to change, familiar faces move away, and you wonder: where did home go? The marriage breaks up and the children become commuters, bouncing back and forth between two houses. Where did home go? Even your faith which has carried you through so much grows hard to hold on to. You don't feel the same at church as you used to. Where did home go? Or just that indefinable something: you never have the success or make the money you'd hoped for, or you climb the ladder all the way to the top but still aren't happy. You know there must be a way to get back home, but darned if you can find it.

Well, here's the sound of God calling the exiles home after decades in exile:

Comfort ye, O comfort ye my people,
says your God
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and cry to her that she has served her term. (Isaiah 40:1)

And again,

Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west, I will gather you;
I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth. (Isaiah 43:5-6)

In the prophet's imagination, the Lord created a highway from Babylon to Jerusalem, the highway home. God lifted up every valley and brought low every mountain so the way home might be straight and clear.

Now we mustn't oversimplify or romanticize the Israelites' homecoming from exile. Not everyone made the trip—some were too sick, some had died, and some just didn't want to go. And when they got there, as Ezra and Nehemiah make clear, life wasn't easy and things weren't the way they used to be. And yet God had called and brought them home.

And here's what I'm wondering: how is God calling us home today? Well, maybe it's just that I've been a pastor too long, but I believe God calls us home to the church. Maybe not always this particular church or some other particular church, but to a church. Now trust me, I know how easy it is to get estranged from church. It is, after all, your one day to sleep in or travel or play golf. Church is so demanding—they're always asking you to do something or give for something, when all you want to do is rest. And for church to be worth it, the message had better be top notch . . . and often isn't. And then I hear words like this: Where was the church when my baby was sick or my mother was dying? Why should I go to church?

And yet it is with the church that we sing God's praise. It's with the church that we baptize our children, celebrate our marriages, and bury our dead. And even if the church can demand too much, it's also the church that provides a place just to sit, to raise deep questions and wait for answers, to light a candle, cry a tear, and repair the fabric of our lives. And the church is people—not perfect—but fellow seekers, people to lean on, turn to, pray with.

It wasn't until weeks into my preparation that it hit me why I chose "Home for Christmas" as the theme this Advent. I thought it

was because I wanted to reach out to people who haven't been here at Maple Grove for a while and help them reconnect. So I'm sending notes to absent members inviting them 'home for Christmas.' We've made postcards available to you, so you can invite family or friends who are away from church at this point in life. And all of that's good.

But isn't it telling that I chose this theme—Home for Christmas—in the year I moved, moved from one house to another, and especially from one church to another. Perhaps it wasn't all those absent members who were most on my mind after all. Perhaps it was my own longing for a new church to be home that was closest to my heart. Thank you, Maple Grove, for making that come true.

How is God calling us home today? Maybe it's not about going anywhere at all. Here's a story Buechner tells in his book, *The Longing for Home*:

It was toward the middle of December . . . that [the great preacher George Buttrick] 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 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 on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even oxen kneel. Home is where Christ is was what Buttrick said that winter morning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Home, it turns out, is always there all along—there is nowhere you have to go. In fact, you can go great distances and only get farther away. It reminds me of Jesus’ story about the Prodigal Son, who traveled into a far country, thinking that life would surely be better away from father and brother and work and routine. Only it wasn’t. He grew hungry and lonely, and finally he grew desperate enough to go home, where the light was still on and the Father’s arms were open wide. You can always go back home, is Jesus’ message. It’s not exactly a Christmas story, except it is. Oh, it is.

Are you going home for Christmas? No, I'm not asking if you're traveling this year, or even if you'll be with family. I'm asking if you're going *home*—that sense of peace, that blessed rest, the heart's true home. Home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem. Home is where Christ is was what the preacher said that winter morning. And still his word is true.

Once there was a way to get back home.

The song expresses the longing of a generation, better yet the longing of the human race. And the good news, the gospel message, is this: there *is* a way to get home. Home is where Christ is.

O my friends, it is my prayer for you this season—for you to be home this Christmas. Let us pray:

O God, take the longings of our heart and use them to lead us home. We do so many things, we go so many places, we spend and buy and wear ourselves out—only to find ourselves in a far country. Help us to come to ourselves, O God, and come home this Christmas, where the light is still on and your arms are always open.

Heal our hearts, Lord Jesus. Where we have been hurt by your people, where we have been left cold by your worship, when even you have seemed far away—heal our hearts, Lord, and bring us home. This very morning, Lord, we take our place at the manger where even oxen kneel. We want to be home, O Christ, with you. Amen.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*, 19.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buechner, 24-25.