



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Ash Wednesday

February 10, 2016

“Yearning for Home”

(1 Peter 1:8-12)

Rev. David K. Groth

COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, You despise nothing You have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and contrite hearts that lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness we may receive from You full pardon and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever yearned to go home? Sure you have; we all have. A young person goes off to college, filled with excitement and apprehension. If that student came from a good home, by the time Thanksgiving rolls around, he's yearning to go home. If you've served in the military, served overseas, or been in combat, you know the yearning for home. Even when you go on vacation, as enjoyable as it is, you eventually say, "It'll be good to get back home."

That yearning for home can be true on a daily basis as well. We go to work/school and by the end of the day we look forward to being home, to relax with the people we love.

St. Peter wrote our Epistle lesson to people who yearned for home in a way you and I cannot really appreciate. The recipients of his letter didn't have an earthly home and an earthly country the way you and I have our homes and our country. They lived in what we today call Turkey. Many were legal aliens, not citizens as you and I are. They tended to be poor. They were have-nots who wished they could have more. Some of them were slaves, despised and subject to beatings. They were a minority in society, unlike us Christians, still the majority in America. They yearned for home like we cannot imagine. St. Peter couldn't change their status but he did invite them to see their lives as a journey to their true home. He told them and tells us, how blessed we are that Jesus is leading us on our journey to our true home.

"Though you have not seen him, you love him" Peter writes. "Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with

glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Our journey is toward salvation. Although our circumstances are different than those people long ago, we’re yearning for deliverance just like them. The troubles you have, the ills you struggle with, all the unwanted stuff that sin causes in our lives . . . You’re journeying toward a home where those former things will be no more. Paul says we can’t even imagine what that home will be like. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Part of the lesson here is to keep yearning for that home! Don’t grow too comfortable here. Don’t settle in too much. Don’t begin to think of this as your true home.

In the 6th century before Christ, the Babylonians conquered Judah and Jerusalem. They destroyed the city and leveled the ancient Temple. The Promised Land became a province of Babylon. You can imagine the spiritual and psychological toll this had on God’s people. It seemed God had abandoned them and his covenant with them. It seemed they were no longer God’s people. All the evidence was saying he had finally washed his hands of them.

Part of Babylonian strategy to maintain control of conquered lands was to gather up all the ruling elite and the academics and the artisans, gather up all the people of influence and affluence and haul them back into captivity in Babylon. This way it would be harder for conquered lands to organize and fund a successful rebellion. Those left behind were to continue farming and tending to the orchards and vineyards. But listen to the homesickness in Psalm 137 of those who were taken: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

Now, don’t think of those Jewish captives as sitting around in dark and dank Babylonian prisons. No, the Babylonians were smarter than that. They put their captives

to work and gave them a level of freedom and citizenship. If you were a musician you started playing music again. If an architect, you designed buildings. If an academic, you taught.

Remember, their captivity lasted seventy years. You can imagine then, how over that period of time, many of them started to forget who they were, and began to be absorbed and swallowed up into Babylonian culture. Their children and grandchildren grew up as little Babylonians speaking the local dialect fluently to the distress of their parents and grandparents. Their young men took Babylonian women as their wives. Many of them prospered quite well in Babylon. By the time the Lord stirred up the Assyrians and used them to crush Babylon, thereby freeing the Jews from any restraints from going back to Judah, by the time all that happened, many of the Jews living in Babylon didn't want to return to Judah and Jerusalem. Most of them hadn't even ever laid eyes on Judah or Jerusalem. Babylon was home now. Only the oldest ones remembered. Only a portion of the exiles remembered who they were and whose they were. Only a portion still yearned for home.

The same can happen to us, right? We can forget who we are and be totally swallowed up and absorbed by the culture around us. We can forget that we are not yet home.

This world of his, though fallen, is still beautiful, and life can still be very good, very satisfying, so much so that we forget we're only on the journey and we haven't yet arrived home. We cling to this life because it's all we know.

This wasn't so much an issue to those legal aliens to whom Peter was writing. They were poor, scorned, oppressed and despised. They were a sorry, bedraggled lot and were looking forward to being at home with the Lord. Our temptation, on the other hand, is to settle in and wish life could go on here forever. We forget that our citizenship is in heaven.

Therefore, over the course of this Lent we are going to figuratively put on sackcloth and figuratively get down into the ashes to repent of our sins. We're going recover a

bit of holy homesickness. We're going to focus especially on 1 Peter and see how God is still calling us home. But other passages also speak of this yearning for home. In Psalm 42, for example: "As the deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." That's the homesickness I'm talking about.

It's been there since Adam and Eve were evicted from the garden. Better said, they forfeited their home didn't they? It wasn't God's fault. It was their sin and rebellion that drove them out of Eden.

This story of homesickness continues later in the Bible as God's people have no homeland, but are enslaved in Egypt. After their exodus, they wander homeless in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting, yearning for a homeland.

They would finally be given the Promised Land, only to lose it again because of their sin and disobedience.

The New Testament continues the theme of yearning for home. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for instance, we see how playing in the sandbox of selfishness made life miserable for that young man, and how he yearned to come back home, if only as a servant. But this Father is different. He celebrates the boy's return, forgives him, and restores him as his son.

Hebrews 11 reminds us we are still "aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show they are . . . longing for a better homeland, a heavenly one" (v. 13). And again, from Phil. 3, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 20).

So the biblical story of yearning for home is also your story and mine. No matter our address, we are, in fact, homeless, separated, yearning. We need him. We need his love, his grace, his forgiveness, more than anything else in the world. Your home then, the place where you are known, loved, perfectly safe, is where Jesus is. Your true home is not where you grew up. Your home is where Jesus is.

Some of you grew up on a farm, but the barn is gone now and the silo has crumbled and the shed and the chicken house have also disappeared. Maybe even the house was torn down and you can only recognize the property because of a few old trees left standing.

And for some of you, where you grew up, there are still lights on in the house. People live there, but they're not your people. The voices that you knew from infancy have been quieted by death. The sweet smell of grandpa's pipe is no more. It's all changed. You can't go back. That place no longer exists.

Your home, the place where you are known, loved and perfectly and forever safe is where Jesus is. Think of how he gave up his home so you could have a home. When he was born in the flesh, it wasn't in the comforts of heaven, or even in Nazareth where Joseph and Mary lived. It was in borrowed shed in Bethlehem. Even that was temporary. His parents had to steal him away to Egypt until Herod's fear and anger were quelled by death. His ministry was marked by homelessness. Foxes have their holes, and birds their nests, but the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. He had to keep moving, driven either by mission or opposition.

For example, remember the time he went to the region of the Decapolis? He healed a demon possessed man named Legion, and in the process the town lost a herd of pigs. They deemed the cost too high and asked Jesus to get in his boat and shove off . . . which he did.

And remember how the people in his home town had no room or welcome for him? They drove him out and tried to throw him over a cliff. To our knowledge he never went back.

And finally, remember how on the cross he suffered for us? Then there was the cry of dereliction, the complete abandonment of God, the ultimate homelessness! Why? So that you could have a home in heaven.

You don't want to give that up. Let's use this Lent to recover a sense of holy homesickness. God didn't want the people in ancient Turkey to settle in too much. He doesn't

want us to settle in too much either. A little discontent, a desire for something better, a desire for our true home is good. Ps. 73, “Whom Lord have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (v. 25). In the fourth century Augustine wrote, “Thou has made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” Amen.

