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HOME

Isaiah 40:1–11
Psalm 126

“Those who go out weeping
shall come home with shouts of joy”
Psalm 126:6

I wonder ... how much time passes between the “going out weeping” – and the “coming home with shouts of joy? For the psalmist and the people of whom he was writing, that was roughly 40 years.

And that’s a lot of weeping. And during these Advent Sundays, we’ve been following this sweep of time from the exile between 587 to 536 ... and the insights gleaned from those who had lost everything.

And yes, they were found. Home. With shouts of joy!

The worst thing that can happen to anybody had happened to these people. They had been forced from their homes, and herded across the desert; behind them they could see the smoke rising from their beautiful city – their homes – their awesome temple now in flames. Jerusalem devastated. When they arrived in Babylon, they were told bluntly that the past was gone. You are no longer Jews. You have no home to which to return. So get used to it. Your home and your homeland is no more.

The worst thing that can happen to anyone had happened. It has happened down through centuries, and it happens every day, as a matter of fact. For political and, too often, for religious reasons, whole populations of people are removed from home and left to wander in unfamiliar territory. Sudan, Darfur, Zimbabwe. Over the borders of Ukraine a growing number of refugees seek shelter. And Kurds in Turkey. There are Palestinian people in the West Bank who were driven from their homes and who have been living as refugees for over half a century, spending years in camps that are now cities. People who still long for home. Some keep among

their few valuables the key to the door of the home their family lived in for generations and from which they were forcibly removed.

It may be the worst thing that can happen. Two weeks ago **60 Minutes** featured a report about the World Food Program providing relief for people fleeing Syria. Swarms of people ... elderly, mothers and children tracking across desert for safety. Many, many children. The push is to get them out of the war zone and into camps. To be fed, receive medical care, and get back to education. The children were being loaded into trucks. The children go first ... Faithful mothers desperate to save the children ... Many children crying ... grasping to hang on to mother. Mothers hoisting their children up into the trucks...to relative safety.

A reporter observed, “Of all the things that happen during war, this one—making your children go away in order to keep them safe—must be the most terrible. I don’t know how they endure it.”

That exile, some five centuries before the birth of Jesus, is a defining moment, not only because of the human tragedy, but also because it refuted the whole notion of God—God’s power, God’s strength, God’s love. Indeed, does God even exit? The biblical literature composed during that 40 year exile is full of tragedy and despair.

Psalm 137 begins with heartbreaking homesickness,
 “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and wept
 when we remember Zion.”

and moves along to doubt, “How can we sing the Lord’s
 song in a foreign land?”

and then to white-hot anger, “O daughter of Babylon,
 you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you
 back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be
 who take your little ones and dash them against a
 rock!”—a sentence so angry and ghastly that we wish
 it weren’t there and almost never speak it out loud.

But that’s how people feel when they have lost everything ... their home, their children, their finest loves ... realizing at such deep

levels that they have lost all control. And the world has run amuck.

And the prophets try to explain; to discover and to explain
“WHY?” Some blame the people for forgetting the law,
 for disobedience, neglecting their religious duties,
 trampling on the poor.

”This tragedy of exile is punishment for your
 sins, they say.

But then, rising above the weeping and wailing, the lament and grief, the anger and revenge, rising above the prophetic attempts to explain the calamity, a lone, clear voice -- an awesome pitch-perfect voice rises above all else ...

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”

It’s the voice of a poet, back in Jerusalem living among the ruins. He writes a letter to the exiled community. He changes the subject from guilt and blame, and offers a different assessment: punishment for your sins doesn’t make sense; it’s way out of proportion; you’ve suffered double.

It’s an argument that emerges every time tragedy strikes: the victims must have done something wrong.

Hurricane Katrina? I recall a zealous televangelist who announced, “This is God’s wrath on New Orleans for holding a gay pride parade.”

9/11? God is punishing America for trying to take God out of the Pledge of Allegiance and for the Roe V.

Wade Supreme court decision

Superstorm Sandy? – God is punishing God’s people for state-sanctioned Casino gambling.

“Wait a minute!” the Godly poet exclaims, “You’ve got it all wrong. God is not a bloody avenger as some popular preachers and politicians try to insist. God doesn’t come as an angry dictator evening the score with those who sin.

Stop it. Fear not. Here is your God.

”He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
 gather the lambs in his arms,
 carry them in his bosom.”

How's that for a new idea, a new way of knowing God?

“And, now we are going home. Right back through the desert, the same way we got there. God will lead us home. But not like a mighty general, leading divisions of well-armed, vengeful troops, but like a shepherd, gathering scattered lambs, leading, carrying them home.”

Psalm 126, which I read this morning, was written at that time: “Those who go out weeping . . . shall come home with shouts of joy”; “our mouths will be filled with laughter.”

The idea of home and homecoming is powerful and deep in the heart of every one of us. Is there a better picture anywhere than in our own experience over Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays? Packing-up the family car and driving home – or flying ... And then also ...some still in military fatigues returning from Afghanistan and the moment of reunion with tears and kisses and embraces, children running and leaping into their father's or mother's arms, spouses, parents, overwhelmed with gratitude and joy. Welcome home.

Home – Homecoming touches deeply.

“I'll Be Home for Christmas, If Only in My Dreams”

“There's No Place like Home for the Holidays”

And among the oldest homecoming music of all:

“Comfort, comfort my people.

Prepare the way. Every valley shall be lifted up and every hill made low.”

We are going home.

Garrison Keillor's genius is knowing how important home is.

“Christmas and the days of waiting beforehand exert powerful forces,” Keillor writes. “We turn a corner in a glitzy shopping mall and some bars of a carol 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 into our car and go home.”

The idea of home and homecoming resides deep in our hearts.

The infant Jesus was born miles from home. As a man he remembered those words about the shepherd feeding his flock, gathering the lambs, leading them home. It is what he did. It's what Jesus did. It was the vocation to which he gave his life.

As we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, we do so best by following Jesus lead: by gathering the lambs, feeding, carrying, holding, leading home. It's what we do as a church: As we select clothing for needy children at Downes elementary school and offer to mentor and read to children. We tend ... we gather the lambs. It's what we do when we reach out to homeless men and women with food and clothing and abundant cookies at Elkton Community kitchen and Hope Dining Room and Saint Andrews shelter and kitchen in Wilmington.

Men, women, children ... Teetering on the brink, or homeless and hoping to receive food, warm clothing, a caring presence, an experience of grace in the middle of an all-too busy and careless world, a reminder of a home that once was and, more than that, a home to which we, all of us, finally belong.

But then also we work for justice ... we recognize and name the powers and principalities which bind men and women – especially the children. Aren't you appalled by the sight of those children fleeing Syria ... their mothers hoisting them into trucks ... heading for they know not where ... but they desperately hope for home. And we hope – we work with them.

It is a different Christmas this year. In addition to global threats; new incidents of terrorism; depressing continuation of political corruption, too many guns ... too little restraint, a stuck-in-place government at all levels, still underemployment. People afraid their savings for retirement will not stretch far enough.

And so as we sing in the familiar carol, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" ... It does have a certain familiarity ...

And we, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow

You know, that sounds relevant and personal. We need, perhaps as never before, a good and hopeful and comforting word. And much better than words ... our world – our cities and neighborhoods long for acts of courage, kindness, a big helping of humility and a gracious welcome HOME.

We return home as we are accepted as we are, and as we accept others,

We return home where we are always welcome, and where we welcome others.

We are at home where we are forever safe regardless of what else is happening to us, and where we make such allowances for others. That home that resembles, for all the world, the stable in Bethlehem.

In the days ahead, as we go once again to Bethlehem, we are in the truest sense coming home:

Home to the shepherd who loves us and from whose love nothing will ever separate us

Home to the God who came to those exiles centuries ago with comfort and joy.

Home to the God who came in the birth of a child and in the life and love, the death and resurrection of the one who was and is God's truest revelation, God's greatest gift, Jesus Christ, our forever home.

Friends, I believe that the home we long for and belong to is, in truth, where Christ is.

I believe home is Christ's kingdom, where Christ rules both within us and among us as we wend our cautious, though at times reckless ways through the world in search of Home.

“Those who go out weeping ... shall come home with shouts of Joy”

Amen.