

Longing for Home

“Our Hearts Are Restless Till They Find Their Rest in Thee”

Text: Jeremiah 29:11-13; Matthew 1:23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Christmas carols are playing. The anticipation of the children is rising. The season of preparation is well under way, and we await the celebration of the King of Glory. It's such a lovely time of the year. It's a time of the year that is so filled with memories, filled with all of the great traditions that have surrounded us throughout all of our days. Yet, if you are a pastor or a therapist, you would find that this lovely season is also a season of an increased caseload because, for all of its loveliness and all its joy, it seems also to be a season in which there is an acuteness of sadness and melancholy. So many experience in these holiday days the aching loneliness that overcomes them, perhaps suddenly without warning, and one is deluged in deep feeling. It may be because the season triggers in us memories of home, of childhood. It may be that we recognize that our dreams have been shattered, or that our hopes have been crushed, or maybe in a moment of reflection we simply know that we've traveled a long way from home.

That's the experience of exile. The word itself beginning with “ex” from the Latin means “out of,” and it means out of home. If you've ever made application for a passport, you'll know that they want to know your domicile. Domicile is a permanent address, a home address. But in exile, one has no domicile because one has no permanent address.

The experience of exile is familiar to us who are traditioned in the biblical story. Just a couple of weeks ago, concluding our trip through Israel's tradition, we found Judah, the southern kingdom, in exile in Babylon. The southern kingdom had ended in 586 as the Babylonians had come in and torn down the walls, burned down the temple and removed the finest of Jerusalem's residents. Eight hundred miles to the north and east, there they were in exile. You may remember that the Psalm lesson of the morning was sung for us by Greg Martin, Psalm 137,

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept.

We hung our harps on the willows.

For they said to us, “Sing us a song of Zion.

But how could we sing a song of Zion in a foreign land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.

May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”

The deep grief, the awful ache that comes through so poignantly in that Psalm was an expression of a literal exile, which many in our day know as well. Refugees in Rwanda, the terrible tragedy that continues to go on in the former Yugoslavia, the nation seeming paralyzed to do something about that awful situation. So, there are many in our day who do know literal exile, as did Judah.

Exile, the experience of it out of the scriptures has become a central metaphor or image for the human condition, because we are all vulnerable. It happens to us all at one time or another. It overtakes us unawares and we seem drowning in melancholy and sadness for which we can really find no immediate cause. It is a longing for home. We are all vulnerable to it, even though we may give our domicile as a very fine address. Because, finally, home is not a matter of geography. Finally, home is a matter of places of the heart. I suppose that it is because home is that place that we come from and that place that we go to that we know in the meantime we are homeless.

For we come from God and we go to God. God is our whence and our whither, and in the meantime we are simply not home. St. Augustine’s words are so often quoted because they say it better than any way I can think of saying them:

Thou hast created us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.

None of us is home yet because, finally, home is not a matter of geography. Home has to do with the places of the heart, and we will therefore sense that none of us are home yet and will, now and again, have a strange longing for home.