

Going Home

From the Advent Series on "Home"

Text: Isaiah 40:1, 11; I Thessalonians 4:17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I have chosen the texts and the themes for this season in the light of the course that we have followed through the fall in surveying the Biblical story of Israel.

We left Israel in exile in Babylon, and I did that purposely because I knew Advent was coming. It's a marvelous time to pick up the prophetic promises and themes that were addressed to that people in exile. Israel, Judah, in exile was in despair and in the midst of their despair where they were weeping on the banks of the rivers of Babylon, where they could not sing the Lord's song, in the midst of that despair they received a surprising word of hope. The prophet Jeremiah sent them a letter in which he said to them, in effect, get on with your life and know that the Presence of God is not a matter of geography, but the location of God's Presence is the heart. "And if with all your heart you truly seek me, you will surely find me," find the Presence of God even in that situation of exile.

Now, after some decades in which indeed they had settled in, there was another word from another prophet. We don't know who he was, but his work is in Isaiah 40 to 55. This prophet's word broke the silence and pierced the despair of this people who had given up on the covenant of grace and the promises of God, this people who had finally considered Babylon to be their home, this people who had really forgotten Jerusalem even though they had vowed never to do so. This prophet arose and spoke these words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. You are going home." This prophet who was a part of that exilic community observed the shifting of the balance of power on the international scene. This was characteristic of Hebrew prophets, for you will remember that it was Habakkuk who saw in the rise of Babylon the instrument through which judgment on Judah, God's own people, would be brought. Now this prophet sees in the rise of another world power an instrument, not of judgment, but of grace, an instrument of liberation.

Indeed, if we would go over just a few more chapters, to the 45th chapter, this is how God addresses the king of Persia, whose name is Cyrus. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed," to Cyrus. Anointed. God's anointed. God's messiah. This king.

“Thus says the Lord to his anointed,” to Cyrus, “whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him.” Why will God anoint a Cyrus in Persia in order to subdue nations? Well, the fourth verse says, “For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name. I name you though you do not know me.” You see, it was the conviction of the prophets in Israel’s tradition that God was a major player on the scene of history. It was the conviction of these prophets that the decisions were not made in smoke-filled cloakrooms, but rather that God was the invisible player, a major player of the dreams of history.

So now we have a prophet bringing comfort, announcing liberation, saying to Judah, “You’re going to go home.” He didn’t immediately respond to the message. As a matter of fact, he resisted the message. He heard a voice that said, “Cry,” or as Martin Luther has translated it perhaps more effectively, he heard a voice that said, “Preach.”

And he said, “Preach, why should I preach? The grass withers. The flower fades. Why should I preach?”

The word comes back, “Preach. For it is true the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.”

So this prophet in the dialogue heard the call and was confirmed in his conviction that the word of God after all was a liberating, saving word, and he announced that word in the midst of his people in exile. He said to them in effect, “Be comforted. You are forgiven. You are going home. Announce to the cities of Judah, behold your God.”

They went home. They went home and the prophet’s word was confirmed. But it never lived up to the glorious image that he had set. They went home, a remnant. Oh, there was another temple, but it lacked the glory of the former temple. They rebuilt the walls, but that community was nothing more than a worshiping, waiting community in poverty and often in sorry straits. Yet, they went home. The prophet believed that God would bring God’s people home. His vision, his dream was a dream of a fulfillment and the consummation of the whole historical drama that would issue in that messianic kingdom, that kingdom of *shalom* where lion and lamb would lie down together, and where they would not hurt in all God’s holy mountain. It was a prophetic conviction that God is a major player in history. Do you believe that?

For some nineteen hundred years the Jews in dispersion after 70 AD celebrated their Passover wherever they were and in the liturgy there were the words, “Next year in Jerusalem.” Rabbi David Hartman of Jerusalem says that, after nineteen hundred years, today they celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. Do you think that that has anything to do with God’s involvement in the drama of history? Did Habakkuk see behind Babylon’s rise the judgment of God? Did the prophet of this morning’s lessons see, behind the rise of Cyrus, God’s engagement? I suppose we

could talk about that all day and not solve it, but that really is not the question of this Advent Sunday.

The question that I would rather focus you on is this. Is it possible within history to be at home? Is it possible in the midst of our human experience, in the stream of history, is it possible to be home? Maybe Israel's best gift to the world is the possibility of being home in history. If you read the Hebrew Scriptures there's not much about anything beyond. There's not anything about heaven. There's not any discussion of life after death. Maybe Israel's best gift to the world was the call to celebrate here and now. Israel delights in life—celebrates life. I think that it has a real gift to give us in calling us not to miss this life, to enjoy God in the land of the living. The Christian emphasis, in contrast, that has put the focus on heaven, that has been somewhat other worldly, has often removed from us the valuing of this life, and not enabled us to celebrate this life, I think, as perhaps God the creator of all would have us celebrate it. Israel celebrates God in this present life. History within history. Yet, I wonder if it's enough?

Bertrand Russell the English philosopher and avowed atheist writes this, "Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom sinks pitiless and dark, blind to good and evil. Omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way, for man condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gates of darkness. It remains only to cherish ere yet the blow falls the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day." Sounds almost like the pessimism of the prophet who said, "All flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades." Bertrand Russell says, I may lose the love of my life unless for me the bell tolls first. That being the reality of our human situation, is it enough? Can one be home within history?

It wasn't enough for the people in Thessalonica. Paul had gone there preaching the Gospel. He preached a crucified, risen, ascended, reigning, coming Lord. And he preached it with such urgency and he pointed to the imminence of that return with such power that the people in Thessalonica began to expect that any moment the heavens would open and the clouds would be illumined and the Lord of Glory would appear. Then someone lost the love of her life. Then someone received the death sentence and they began to wonder, if I should die before the clouds sparkle with the appearing Lord, will I miss out on it all? Paul wrote to them to say, "No. We who are alive at the coming of the Lord won't have an advantage over those who have died. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so those who fall asleep in Jesus, God will bring with him. So I write these things to you that you sorrow not as those who have no hope. I write these things to you; comfort one another with these words." Paul's pastoral concern for this people was to assure them that the entrance of death before the advent of the end did not mean that one would miss the party. He went on to describe the scenario of the end. Archangels, trumpets, clouds. And it didn't happen.

The messianic kingdom hasn't come either. As I observe our history in our day it doesn't seem that we are any closer to seeing the lion and the lamb lying down together than when the prophet dreamed the dream. And when I read Paul's dramatic presentation of the end event and realize that it's two thousand years later, frankly, I'm not going to hold my breath. Interesting, isn't it, that both the prophet and the apostle had this intuitive sense of some kind of completion? But the images in which they set it forth, the symbols with which they presented it, the pictures that they painted in both cases—they haven't come to be. They may still, and yet I wonder if perhaps the prophet's dream and the apostle's vision are not rather pictures of an intuitive conviction and truth that within history no one can finally be home. Oh, to be sure, the prophet's dream had the culmination within history. The apostle, who was nurtured on that dream, had a vision of a culmination beyond history's end. But, never mind. Both of them had to believe. In the case of the Hebrew prophet, the end could not be the chaos of history, but rather its resolution. And in the case of the apostle, the end could not be a gaping grave, but a meeting with God the Lord, the presence of God's people with God everlastingly. Both the prophet and the apostle were simply wrong in the portrait that they drew or painted. So what? How would you have drawn it? They were stumbling, stammering humans trying to give some expression to something that was deep within them, that the end could not be history's chaos nor the cold and open grave, but rather that there was yet something, something more.

You see it seems to me that both the prophet and the apostle had that deep sense that yes. . . yes, the grass withers and the flower fades, yes . . . human life ends with history still in chaos and those who have loved experiencing loss, but there must be something more. I think both the prophet and the apostle, and I think probably you and I as well, know that God has made us such that we will always, always break down those end points. We will not be satisfied. There is something insatiable within the human mind and within the human heart. Within the human being there's something that will not be satisfied until finally there is an expansiveness that we have not yet dreamed of. There is something in us that says there are places I have not yet gone, there are words I have not spoken, there are loves I have not yet expressed. There is not the possibility in the brief span of this historical existence to satisfy all of that that is within me. I'll never, never, never rest with the contingency of history's whirlpool. I will believe, I will hope that beyond somewhere, someway, sometime all of this that is in me that yearns for expression, for expansiveness, for eternity will be satisfied. Probably not with lions and lambs lying down together. Probably not as the issue of some flaming deity from heaven.

But there must be something more. For down deep within us, when surrounded with the blackness of the darkest night, Oh how lonely death can be. At the end of this long tunnel there shines a light where death is swallowed up in victory. Can you imagine stepping on shore and finding it heaven? Of touching a hand and finding it God's? Of breathing new air and finding it celestial? Of waking up in glory and finding you're home . . . finally home?