

“Come, Follow Me Home”

We come now to the end of the Advent-Christmas season, and what a season it has been! We’ve learned a lot about God’s grace, how it calls us towards Christ’s hope-filled coming, even as we wait with anticipation. We’ve learned how God’s grace transforms us into holy people, even as we attempt to be ‘bearers of holiness.’ We’ve learned how God’s grace connects us to the larger story of God’s plan for reconciliation and redemption. All that’s left to do is bring the message of Advent and Christmas home so we can get into the Epiphany season.

It feels like it’s time for a “homecoming.” After this past year of great change, political division, moves for justice, and disruption of so many lives in many different ways, many are longing for a “homecoming.” This may depend on what one defines as a homecoming. For some the word homecoming might be used to refer to an alumni weekend for schools or campuses. It may refer to a pilgrimage we take every year to the vacation area where our family spent time together. “Homecoming” may refer to the return of someone working far away, like a missionary or a member of the armed forces. It can even refer to someone’s death, and the fact that someone has gone to be with God. Regardless of how we define “homecoming,” its intention is to make people feel valued, appreciated, and loved.

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
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The Rev. Hillary Taylor uses the text of Jeremiah 31:7-14 for the sermon today as part of the Come Follow Me, Advent series. This text concerns the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites. They were suffering changes and disruption in their lives. Before being conquered by the Babylonians, some 600 years before the birth of Jesus, they were a little too “at home” with the injustice and idolatry happening throughout the kingdom. The Israelites refused to acknowledge their need for God’s grace, so God allowed the Babylonians to invade their land. It was the only way to get the attention of these covenant-breaking people.

The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. After the war, the Israelites were forced to emigrate 1,600 miles (about the distance from Belton, South Carolina to El Paso, Texas) to Babylon’s capital city. They were forced to make a home for 70 years in a place that hated their very existence. Their experience of exile is recorded in 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?”* (vv.1,4). The people feel complete and utter homesickness. In order to survive the exile, the Israelites need an indestructible source of hope. They need a vision of their homecoming back to the Holy Land.

Fortunately, before the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem the prophet Jeremiah shared a vision of homecoming with them. It happens to be our scripture today. In

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this vision, God beckons the children of Israel to come back to Jerusalem. But not just any Jerusalem---a new Jerusalem, in a new Israel. It's a new land with new rules. All of the sins committed by the Israelites? They are all forgiven. All the anger God expressed toward them when they refused to live like a covenant community? All of it is gone. That slate is completely blank. The Israelites are re-adopted as God's beloved children, free to become the holy people they were originally created to be. Jeremiah says God wants to give them a second chance---even though they don't deserve it. Because our God does not abandon us. God is about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

In Jeremiah's vision, God does not just extend this homecoming to average Israelites. God extends it to the "faithful remnant of Israel, "the people who were cast out of the community before the Babylonian invasion, the people who did not have any rights to begin with in the old, unfaithful nation. God invites all sorts of folks from the margins of society to be first in line back to the Holy Land; the blind, the lame, pregnant women, women with children. God calls these members to lead the masses on this homecoming journey. After all, the marginalized are the most in need of a homecoming because they are most in need of a home. And God wants to provide this home for them. As Jeremiah tells us, God does not abandon us. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

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As for those who are homesick by the streams of Babylon, God sees them too, and is coming to their rescue. Jeremiah envisions God walking alongside them, like a shepherd herding lost sheep. God wants to bring these Israelites to a new source of water. Tears that were once shed from trauma will give way to tears for joy. These tears will break the hardened hearts of the Israelites so that love can grow among their loneliness. And from this holy love, worship of the Lord will spontaneously erupt. There will be laughing, singing, and dancing of all styles, from all sorts of unlikely people. Because God does not abandon us and is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home.

When I read this vision from Jeremiah, I, too found myself longing for this kind of homecoming. I've never been relocated from my home. As a child, I had to move every four years and leave my friends. I would go through some type of loneliness for a few months as I readjusted to new surroundings. I felt a little homesick for the place I left. Today I feel homesick for a world that doesn't yet exist with justice for all.

But maybe---just maybe---Jeremiah's vision of a home isn't as far off as we think. As Christians, we believe Jesus' birth allows us to experience a foretaste of God's homecoming here on Earth. Like the vision of God drawing the Israelites into a new nation, Jesus draws us towards salvation---even when we can't see it or

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don't know we need it. Like the vision of God remaking the social order, Jesus forgives us of our sins and regenerates us into new people, even when we don't deserve it. Like the vision of God making the floundering flourish, Jesus makes us holy our whole lives long.

With the birth of Christ, God has introduced an invitation of salvation which makes a homecoming available to all. In our New Testament reading from Matthew 2:1-12, we read of the magi coming from the east to honor and meet Jesus. This story illustrates that God's salvation through Jesus was open to all, of all creeds and races. The homecoming promised to the Israelites is promised to all.

Homecoming is a grace-filled invitation always available to God's people, though it may take different forms at different times. But while we live on earth, we also must know our experience of homecoming is not complete. We wait for a time when sin and death will be completely destroyed, where the traumas of war will not be experienced, where people will no longer be marginalized by societal status, where everyone has enough of what they need, where all are satisfied with what they have, where joy and gladness are easily experienced.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ, the story of the Magi also gives us a lesson in power. We are living through a time when some church leaders and some Christians seem to wish that the power of God would be more like the power of

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Herod. Some are enamored with the power of the institutions on earth. But when churches or human beings try to wield God's power as though it was a cudgel instead of a handful of seeds, a baby, or a cross, we tend to get things wrong like the Crusades or the Inquisition.

We must remember that the power of God is not like the power of Herod. Herod was sneaky, brutal, cruel, and paranoid. He attempted to use the Magi to find Jesus and kill him. The power of Herod can never be trusted. The power of God is vulnerable and lifegiving. The power of God is not a takeover or massacre but seeking and finding, going home, second chances, and the spreading of good news like seeds, near and far, good news that changes people not from the top down but from the bottom up.

The story of the Epiphany---and all of the Christmas story---is the beginning of a long story about how God uses power in Jesus not to overpower us, but to dwell among us and love through us. So, while we figure out how to make a home in spite of our homesickness, it is our duty not only to study the birth of Christ as much as possible. We must also embody Christ's life, so that the world will feel more like the Holy Kingdom it was created to be. As we learned in the first sermon in this series, "while we wait, we work." Filling the world with God's grace is the only way to go from a feeling of exile, to a feeling of homecoming. It will not be

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easy. It will not be perfect. But the good news is that God does not abandon us in the process. God is all about grace, redemption and welcoming us home. The passage from Jeremiah assures us that it doesn't matter who we are, where we have been, what we've done, how imperfect we are; God will see us through to a new Holy Land. And as we look towards the world that will be, maybe justice will actually roll down like a river, and righteousness will be like a mighty stream, as the prophet envisions in Amos 5:24. Maybe there will be a real feeling of abundance, joy, and gladness! Amen!

Credit is given to the Rev. Hillary Taylor for use of her sermon outline and use of excerpts from her sermon in the preparation of this sermon.