

I WILL BRING YOU HOME

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Like many of you, I watched with interest as the first planeload of Syrian refugees arrived at Toronto's airport this week.

I watched with both general interest and with eager anticipation of similar scenes when the families that we are sponsoring will arrive in Lethbridge.

(Update: I had confirmation that they had their interview at the embassy on Friday!)

Regardless of our politics, I think many of our hearts were warmed at the sight of our nation's prime minister (among many others) at the airport with his sleeves rolled up, smiling, greeting Syrian families, passing out winter coats, welcoming these people who had been through so much to Canada.

At one point, he said something that I have been thinking about a lot over the past few days. It was a statement as simple as it was profound:

Welcome home.

There's a lot going on in those two simple words, isn't there?

On the face of it, those words are a little absurd. "Home," for these people is a world away. It is a place that has been devastated by war, a place that likely looks little today like the place they may have remembered from their younger years.

But everything about who they are—their language, culture, religion, relationships, assumptions, expectations, habits, etc.—is bound up with the place they are *leaving*, not the place they have now arrived at.

Home is *back there*. Here might be wonderful and new and exciting, it might have all kinds of possibilities, but it's not home. Not yet, at least.

But symbolically, those two little words are huge. They are a statement of intent, a declaration of hope that this strange new (cold) place *will come to be* the place that you think of when you think of the word "home."

I think of the work that has gone into preparing the house that our families will be living in. There is furniture and a fresh coat of paint and even some food in the pantry. When our families come, I anticipate welcome signs and gifts and food... All to communicate that we hope that this new land will come to be something they call "home."

Those two words are an expression of hope for new futures and better opportunities.

Welcome home.

On this third Sunday of Advent, I am thinking of "home."

Home is on many of our minds at this time of year, isn't it?

This is the season where people come "home for the holidays," the time when we see people we haven't seen for months or even years. Kids come home, siblings are reunited.

Perhaps we think of nostalgic wintry scenes—ice skating, pond hockey, sledding, fire places. Or perhaps we think of homes full of laughter and lots of food and lights and gifts.

We pack a lot of hope and meaning into the word "home," at Christmas time and beyond.

And the seasons come and go. Sometimes our expectations are just about met. More often, they are not. At least not fully.

Perhaps there are relationship breakdowns. Perhaps someone is missing this year. Perhaps someone has died. Perhaps there are financial worries. Perhaps being home for Christmas reminds us of what we *don't* have for the rest of the year.

Perhaps, for whatever reason or combination of reasons, the season just isn't able to bear the weight of expectation that we bring to it.

Or, perhaps the season was everything we hoped it would be, but of course it doesn't last. We have to go back to our ordinary lives, sometimes in places far from home.

Many, many people report feelings of bittersweet longing after the Advent/Christmas season has come and gone whether the season was all they had hoped for or not.

On this third Sunday of Advent, and as we move toward this season of expectation, can I encourage us to pay attention to these feelings?

Can I even encourage us to see these feelings as symptoms of a larger and more significant longing?

Frederick Buechner preached a sermon once where he said, "Faith is homesickness."

I think he simply means that faith is a longing for something that can never quite be realized in the way that we hope for it, or never quite having it last as long as we want it.

There are few descriptions of this generic human longing that I have come across that match that of C.S. Lewis in his famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory" delivered at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, and later published in 1941.

Lewis speaks about how each of us has this deep longing for what he calls a "far-off country." He talks about how certain experiences trigger in us a desire for something that we can't quite place our finger on.

Sometimes an experience—reading book... listening to a piece of music... a sunset hike in the majestic Rockies... a human relationship... a memory of wintry Christmases past will seem to point beyond itself and will awaken something within us that we can't quite describe.

A word like “beauty” comes closest to describing what stands behind these experiences, but even this doesn’t fully describe the hold that this far-off country has on us or the manner in which it draws us.

Listen to how Lewis puts it:

These things... are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. **For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.**¹

In the meantime, our experience is sometimes bittersweet. We live in this intermediate state between promise and fulfillment, between desire and consummation.

Between longing for home and arrival.

Our days are characterized by this ache. We can’t always (or even *often*) describe it. Some days it feels stronger than others. It comes and it goes.

But it never leaves us entirely.

Later in “The Weight of Glory, Lewis describes this longing for a far-off country as our “inconsolable secret.”

The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory... becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, **and welcome into the heart of things**. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.²

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity, and the Church* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 98-99.

² Lewis, 103.

This desire to be “welcomed into the heart of things” is, I think, another way of describing a longing for home.

Not “home” in the sense of a physical space, important as these are.

Not “home” in the sense of the memories and markers along our journeys that inform our self-understanding and identities.

Not even “home” in the sense of familiar people—family, friends, etc—who have named and shaped us.

But home in this deep sense of being reunited with the God who made us.

I’m going to go out on a limb and assume that not many of us spend a great deal of time reading the book of Zephaniah. 😊

It’s one of those easy-to-overlook minor prophets buried in the back of the Old Testament—one of those guys with names that aren’t easy to pronounce who are always going on and on about the judgment of God.

I read the book of Zephaniah several times this week. It isn’t pleasant reading, for the most part.

There *is* a lot of weal and woe and oracles against the people of Judah and their enemies. There’s plenty of condemnation for sin, plenty of death and destruction.

But then, right at the end of this short book, we find this morning’s passage.

It is a passage of restoration, renewal, and hope. It is a story of promise and of homecoming.

Listen to a few of things Zephaniah says to the homesick people of Judah:

- The LORD has taken away the judgments against you
- The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more
- He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing

- He will save the lame and gather the outcast

And then, verse 20:

At that time I will bring you home

Zephaniah is not naïve about the way things are. He knows that the world is not as it should be, that his people are not as they should be. He knows things will get worse before they get better.

But he knows there is a homecoming in the future of his people.

He knows that God will act, that God will come, that God will again rejoice in his people and they in him.

He knows that God will rescue the lame and the oppressed. He knows that God will deal with all who threaten them and liberate them to live free from the fear that so easily comes to dominate their lives.

He knows that they will be forgiven, that their punishment will be taken away.

He knows that God will gather up his people and bring them home—that they will be “welcomed into the heart of things.”

He knows that the door on which they have been knocking all their lives will open at last.

We might not express things in the way that Zephaniah does. But I think that we, like him, have similar longings.

For forgiveness.

For freedom from fear

For victory over enemies, within and without.

For renewal.

For the experience of God's love.

For joy.

For being gathered and brought home.

The good news is that we know something that Zephaniah didn't. Zephaniah looked ahead to a day when God would restore the fortunes of his people. He didn't know exactly what it would look like, but he knew that it would be what he and his people needed.

We *do* know what it looked like.

This Advent, I am reminded again that the coming of Christ is the coming of the One from the far-off land.

The baby in the manger is the one who gives us clues about the scent of a flower we have not found.

The refugee boy who flees for his life is the echo of a tune we have not heard.

The one who had no place to lay his head, the one who was misunderstood and mistreated, the one who gave his life for his friends and for his enemies is the news from a country we have never yet visited.

Jesus is our heart's true home, the fulfillment of all that that we long for (even when we don't really know what we're longing for or how to express it).

And this is why we can be a people who are defined by rejoicing, even as we long for the "far-off country" that C.S. Lewis speaks of.

Did you notice the theme of joy running through our Scriptures this morning?
Zephaniah says:

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

These words were spoken hundreds of years before the arrival of Christ, but by faith we believe that these words are not *just* for homesick Israelite exiles, but for those of us who live on this side of Christ's arrival, too.

Because God has made his home among us in Jesus, and because God promises that he will gather up his people and bring them home, **we are set free to be people of joy and of confident trust.**

Even in this in-between time, between Christ's first and second Advents, this time between promise and fulfillment, between longing for home and being "welcomed into the heart of things."

We can be people of deep joy because we know that the one who promises is faithful.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, on the other side of Christ's Advent, says this:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about *anything*, but in *everything* by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In closing, on this third Sunday of Advent, I want to leave us with two very simple invitations.

1. **Pay attention to your longings.** They are a good clue about what you were made for. They are a signpost to the far-off country that calls your name.
2. **Rejoice.** The Lord your God is near. Jesus shows us this! He will bring you home.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

