

If Only In My Dreams

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 12-16-18
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Waunakee, WI

There is a Christmas song we hear every year, and the words go something like this:

*"I'm dreaming through the night of a place I love
Even more than I usually do;
And though I know it's a long way back,
I promise you:
I'll be home for Christmas; you can count on me,
Please have snow and mistletoe and presents on the tree.
Christmas Eve will find me where the love light gleams.
I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams."*

For almost all of us, this song is just a sweet Christmas ditty trotted out each year by stations that play "oldies." To brighten up the season.

But put yourself in soldier's boots tramping through cold mud in France, or sticky swamp in the Philippines dodging enemy fire Christmas morning, 1944, and suddenly the song takes on a whole new meaning. "I'll be home for Christmas." When you are so far away you can't get there, home for Christmas is a treasured dream.

Exile. The people of Israel are lost in exile. Nobody can get home. What happened to our ancestors in faith was this. A foreign enemy had overrun their homes and their nation and destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They were bound as prisoners and hauled over hundreds of desert miles to a strange land where they were forced to love among people whose language, faith, customs and habits were different from theirs.

Our forbearers could understand the feelings of exile. Many of our immigrant ancestors, like the puritans escaping religious persecution and the Irish escaping extreme poverty, would know the feeling of exile. European Jews immigrating in the 1930's and 40's suffered persecution in the extreme and came to the United States as refugees.

African Americans forced to leave home and family, were taken in slavery to a faraway land.

Themes of exile do echo through our experience: somewhere in the reaches of all our bloodlines, all of us have been in exile to some degree, and can at least imagine what it means to lose home and hearth. "Exile" is a scary word describing a life-shattering event. Exile is a nightmare of the worst kind.

But in today's scripture we hear Good News! God has promised a coming home. Someday the exiles will return to the Promised Land. The exiles are not home yet; the word is a promise, coming when the people are at the lowest point they have ever been as a nation.

Today's scripture sings the promise: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart ... the Lord has taken away the judgments against you, God has turned away your enemies ... you shall fear disaster no more ... The Lord, your God, is in your midst."

For today, Zephaniah joins the ranks of the great prophets. The promise of going home is our own time. Advent is a season of preparing to come home.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "The human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of an abiding sense of homelessness." It is as if we never feel quite at home anywhere but are always seeking that sweet place.

Have you ever wondered why "coming home" is such a powerful image in American culture? Why is one of our favorite Christmas movies, "It's a Wonderful Life?" George Bailey loses his whole life, as if he

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had never existed, and spends the entire movie trying to get home to find himself again.

“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is a story of a little deer who has to go into exile because of what is considered his deformity, but comes home when that red nose turns out to be the whole village’s saving grace.

In a nation almost completely made up of immigrants, it makes sense that one of the games that is uniquely ours is one whose sole purpose is to “get home.”

For most of us – **but not all of us**, home tells us who we are, where we came from, where we hope to go, who we hope to be. Home offers security and warmth and happiness.

Even for the likes of gloomy old Zephaniah, the promise of home is given to us today. The hope of every human heart is to go home, even when we can’t go home.

Families with children make up the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. Think of mothers and fathers trying as best they can to raise their children, but having no home in which to raise them.

Think of the gay son or daughter who wants to come home for Christmas but who fears being judged and rejected by family and by church.

Why are tears shed and hugs shared at Christmas Eve services as much as any other service in the year? Maybe because we discover that home is not so much a place as it is a relationship. Somehow during this time of year, we sense that God connects us to God’s very self in Jesus the Christ. We don’t so much “go home” as we just meet it with open arms when it comes to us from God in Christ.

Worship is homecoming. It is putting ourselves in the place where it is safe to tell the truth; safe to be who we really are in the presence of the holy and loving God.

According to Luke, during the reign of Caesar, all went to their own towns to be registered. The pilgrims included Joseph and Mary, who was expecting a child. In the city of David called Bethlehem, the baby was born, and as Zephaniah had promised, the exile was over. The Lord our God was here to stay.

No matter who you are, what you have done, where you come from; the light is on and in the window for you. The table is set. Come, greet the God who brings us home. Come, greet the God who is home itself. Amen.