

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

It was 77 years ago that Bing Crosby recorded a new Christmas song called “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” You know it:

I’ll be home for Christmas
You can count on me. . . .
Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams.
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams...

It was 1943 and millions of young Americans were far from home, scattered all over a world at war. The song quickly shot to the top of the record charts that year, and it has remained a popular favorite ever since—right up there with Crosby’s “White Christmas.”

Both of these songs touch the deep chord within us that resonates to the idea of *home*. There is, quite simply, no more emotionally evocative, powerful, or important idea than home, and although the pandemic may well prevent many of our traditional gatherings this year—as the war did in 1943—we will all, in some way, go—as we carefully rehearse customs precious in our families, as we bake the cookies, decorate the tree, lovingly place the last remaining ornament from the first ones we purchased decades ago—we will all go home, if, as the song says, only in our dreams.

Six centuries before the birth of Jesus, the people of Israel, God’s people, were dreaming of home. The Babylonians had defeated their nation; devastated their holy city, Jerusalem; leveled God’s temple; and driven the Israelites across the desert to live in Babylonian captivity as exiles. In Babylon, God’s people longed to go home; for fifty years they remembered how it used to be at home in Jerusalem. They sang the old songs. They told the old stories to their children and eventually their grandchildren. Psalm 137 recalls for us the anguish and longing they felt:

By the rivers of Babylon —
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion. . . .
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.¹

¹ Psalm 137:1, 5-6.

We remember those exiled Israelites, longing for home, every year when we sing the great Advent hymn: “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.”

It was in the midst of that exilic community that a new word was spoken in the early 530s before Christ, spoken by one of their greatest poets, a prophet we now know as Isaiah of Babylon. His prophesy begins at the fortieth chapter of the book of the Isaiah with words made familiar not only because we read them every Advent, but because George Frideric Handel chose them to introduce his oratorio *Messiah*:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

The prophet Isaiah comforts the exilic community with a vivid picture: a highway will be built across the vast desert wilderness, a straight shot from Babylon westward to Jerusalem, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough places will be smooth—and over that highway, a procession will move. Banners and trumpets will announce the coming of the king, returning to Jerusalem. “Get you to the high mountain,” the herald commands. “Lift up your voice; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

Isaiah’s prophesy is that the exiles will be going home again. The effect of Isaiah’s words in that community of exiles must have been electric: men standing tall again, mothers telling their children stories that night with a promise: “We’re going home soon. Our God is coming!” Grandmothers beginning to gather up the family belongings: “We’re going home!”

Many of the exiles, no doubt, reveled in martial quality of that image of the God of Israel, the royal potentate riding on his war horse, preceded by banners and trumpets, victoriously proceeding across the desert toward home. After so many years of being trod upon by their captors, wouldn’t they savor the notion that God would finally be flexing the divine muscles on their behalf, slapping around those who had been abusing them, setting things right with God’s irresistible might, commanding the respect of all the nations.

But Isaiah says, no, it’s not going to be like that. Our God is not like that. Yes, God will do a marvelous thing for us, people of Israel. God will lead us home like a triumphant warrior. But our God will *also* be like a shepherd, tenderly speaking, carrying lambs in his arms, gently leading. And God will build our future using those qualities rather than the blunt savagery of his might.

Isaiah’s words have layers of meaning for us Christians above and beyond their original promise to the people of Israel, that they would be going home from Babylon to Jerusalem. We hear also in them the promise that God will be coming to us in the vulnerable flesh of a tiny baby born in a stable. And we hear in them as well the promise that we remember especially during this Advent season, that (as the Nicene Creed puts it): our Lord “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” We take comfort in the hope that God will finish what God began in

the birth of our Savior. Advent is a season for remembering how to hope, for giving ourselves over to its power. In a deeply cynical world, this is no small task.

Like the ancient people of Israel, Christians have often been tempted to imagine the God who will come again as vengeful, wrathful and violent. Popular writing and preaching about the end time and the second coming of Christ is often terrifying and bloody. Isaiah's words should check that misimpression. The God who is coming says, "Comfort, comfort my people." That God is a shepherd who tenderly speaks and carries the lambs in his arms and gently leads his flock home. The God of Isaiah, whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ, expresses strength in gentleness, in tenderness, in radical self-giving to others, in kindness. Christ shows us that God is like that, and that God intends us human beings, made in God's image, to be like that as well.

The comfort and hope of knowing and trusting a God like this are two sides of the same coin. Yet hope can never be for us Christians just a way of being comfortable. Advent hope calls us to action. The Anglican bishop N. T. Wright describes the role of hope for Christians this way:

To hope for a better future in this world—for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for the abused, the paranoid, the downtrodden and despairing, and, in fact, for the whole wide, wonderful and wounded world is not something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought. And to work for that hope is not a distraction from the task of mission and evangelism. It is a central, essential, vital and life-giving part of it.²

Each day, the newspaper headlines underscore for us how interconnected we are as human beings. The coronavirus has really brought that home to us. Some 270,000 Americans have died, and we have all been affected as COVID continues to spread indiscriminately. Our economy has taken a body blow. The U.S. unemployment rate as Christmas approaches is nearly 7 percent, with a net 10 million jobs lost since the start of the pandemic. They say 26 million of our fellow citizens are food insecure these days, and it could get worse as Federal benefits run out on December 31. How are we to respond? It is only natural in uncertain times to long for stability, to want to husband what you have, and to let others take care of themselves.

But that cannot be our answer. It is not enough to tend to your own business, oblivious to the fate of your neighbors. I think of the Ghost of Jacob Marley, dragging his great, heavy chain of regret in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Marley, you remember, had been Ebenezer Scrooge's partner in business, a very successful man of commerce, who died and discovered that he was a failure in all the ways that counted. So Marley's Ghost came to visit Scrooge one Christmas Eve, to warn him to amend his ways before it was too late.

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," [protested] Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

² N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 191-192.

“Business!” cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!”³

For Christians, it is a moral issue, a spiritual issue not to take our comfort while oblivious to the discomfort of those around us.

The good news of Advent comes in ancient words: “Comfort, comfort my people—You are going home. A shepherd will lead you home and carry the lambs, carry any who, for whatever reason, can’t make it on their own. Comfort, comfort—One is coming who speaks tenderly and gathers up all who stumble and fall, all who are sick, all who labor and are heavily burdened, all who are weary, sad, all this morning who are ill and frightened, all whose illness is critical and final, all who are anxious and worried, all who are discouraged and depressed, all who are alone and lonely and homesick. One is coming who gathers them all up and gently leads them—all of them, all of us—home.”

His parents were homeless, after all. They left their home in Nazareth to travel all the way to Bethlehem and after that to Egypt. In Bethlehem, they made a home for their child as best they could. They wrapped him in bands of swaddling cloth to keep him warm and secure. They laid him in a manger and watched over him and kept him safe.

And, somehow, beneath it all, you and I know, that there, in Bethlehem, in the night, as he is born, we are, all of us, finally at home. Filled with the yearning of a mother for her child, our shepherd never ceases to speak tenderly to us, reminding us of whose we are.’

In him, in his love—the love that we are commissioned to share with one another and with all his lambs—we are finally home.

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengthens us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.

³ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: The Folio Society, 2003), 43.