

“Home” for Christmas

Rev. David Reynolds

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

When Bing Crosby first recorded “I’ll be Home for Christmas,” back in 1943, it soared to the top of the charts almost immediately, and it has remained since then one of the most requested Christmas songs year after year.

“I’m dreaming tonight of a place I love, even more than I usually do. And although I know it’s a long road 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 beams. I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.”

He recorded it, of course, when we were in the depths of World War II, and it’s simple lyric struck a chord of the longing for “home” in the hearts of both soldiers and civilians. Everyone knew exactly what that longing was and everyone still knows. And you don’t have to be a soldier or a member of a soldier’s family to know. It’s strange, isn’t it? There are times, when if the song hits you, just so, it brings tears so easily. That longing for “home” is just so close to the surface. Maybe our lives feel more alone, or more like living in exile than we let on even to ourselves most of the time.

I think that’s where the people of Israel were, both literally and figuratively, when the prophet Isaiah brought this word of hope and promise to them from God, recorded in Isaiah 61. They were living in exile, in Babylon, far, far from home. Their homes, of course, back in Jerusalem and its environs had been destroyed along with the Temple, ransacked, burned to the ground. And they’d been taken as captives to Babylon. And during that long captivity, they lived on a diet of remembering and the hope of one day returning home.

We can imagine what that was like. There are still those among us who are living in exile. There are those displaced from home by war and famine, by political oppression, by hurricanes and tsunamis. There are those far from home because of military duty, or because of some other job requirements. But, as we are reminded by that song, “home” is so much more than just familiar landscapes, or familiar walls, or even familiar faces, as utterly important as all of those are. Maybe we too, live in exile. There are so many things that can make us feel not “at home” in life. Sometimes it’s the loss of that true “home” that precedes the loss of home in other ways. People get lost along the way somehow. They lose a vision of their own dignity and worth and end up making self-defeating decisions that land them in prison or on the street.

And that is exile for them and for their families, isn’t it? And sometimes it’s pursuit of a certain vision of “home” that precedes the loss of that true home. You know, too much time just spent grinding at the mill, day in and day out, to the neglect of time to just “be” in creation, and to just “be” with others... to the neglect of time for cherishing and loving life and each other? Sometimes, this season brings that to the fore. Thinking “home” at Christmas means that certain things, certain traditions, certain ornaments, certain foods all have to be in place, we are blind to the mystery happening right in front of us, or we stress ourselves out so much we miss it when it happens. So it is, that sometimes we can’t find “home” right where we hope and expect it to be, with our own families.

Life in exile. What would heal us? How can we really, finally, find and live “at home” in life and in the world? We’re a lot less “at home” in our lives and in our selves than we admit much of the time. Listen to God’s promise in Isaiah. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the

brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." rescue... comfort for all who mourn. And then listen to what God says of these, the brokenhearted and oppressed, "*they* will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to *display* his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins...raise up the former devastations." God comes to bind up the oppressed and brokenhearted and through *them* to rebuild "home" for us all.

Now although it sounds like good news, it's also problematic. You remember it was problematic for Jesus. According to Luke's gospel, Jesus began his public ministry with Isaiah 61 as the blueprint. But, when he preached on this passage in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and interpreted it as a present word of God for them, they got angry and tried to throw him off a cliff! See, the problem is that although God comes to us as one of us, in certain key ways God comes to us as One very different from us. And I don't mean in the classic attributes of God from Greek philosophy, you know, that God is all-knowing, and all-powerful, etc. I mean in the ways that are talked about in our scriptures, like Isaiah. And that is, why would anyone look to the brokenhearted and the oppressed and prisoners as the ones who can rebuild "home" for them? Or, in Jesus' day, why would anyone look to tax collectors and prostitutes and Samaritans, and gentiles as the ones through whom God would rebuild "home" for them? It's problematic.

It's the same problem that John the Baptist speaks of in today's Gospel lesson when he says: "Among you stands one who you do not know." Says Isaiah, God comes to bind up the brokenhearted and bring good news to the oppressed and through them to rebuild "home" for us all. See, the real reason our lives feel like exile, when they do, is that we are not at home in God. It is when we are not able to let go into the mystery of God's love and grace and open our eyes and hearts to see that wherever and in whoever it appears.

W.H. Auden in his poem "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" has King Herod say: O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Eternity would bore us dreadfully. Leave the heavens and come down...Become our uncle. Look after Baby, amuse grandfather, escort Madam to the Opera, help Willy with his homework, and introduce Muriel to some handsome naval officer. Be...like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves."

Later in exasperation, Herod exclaims:

"I asked for a God who should be as like me as possible.
What use to me is a God whose divinity consists in doing
different things that I cannot do or saying clever things that
I cannot understand? The God I want and intend to get must be someone I can recognize
immediately without having to wait and see what he says or does."

Friends, hear the good news. If we'll let him, Christ, who comes to us as a baby born to peasants, who comes to us as a disgraced criminal given the death sentence for treason, Christ will enable us to be "home" for Christmas. Even with relatives we find it hard to be with, even without loved ones we long to be with, even if we're far away, or in prison, even we're mourning or brokenhearted through the losses of divorce or estrangement, or death. Christ will enable us to be "home" for Christmas.

What would it take to finally, find and live "at home" in life and in the world? I think, living close to our true hopes for "home," and so staying open to the presence of mystery and to the mystery of Christ's presence, wherever it happens. That is, faith. It would take faith and hope and love. Singer-songwriter Pierce Pettis, some years ago was going through a divorce.

His children were very young at the time, and he wasn't going to be able to live with them anymore. And, he and they were hurting, and both needed to reassure each other, so they all got together at one point so that they could kind of all decide that no matter what, it was going to be alright. And he wrote a song about that called "Love's gonna carry me home."

It goes like this:

These days
I'm noticing things
The smell of the rain
Wind in the trees when it gets moving
Seems to say
That I'm not alone
And someday
Love's gonna carry me home

These days
I'm learning to smile
The hand of a child
Has led me into fields of laughter
They make
Sure that I know
Someday
Love's gonna carry me home

Amazing grace
Big surprise
Hits you right between the eyes
Hits you hard
Like a small flat stone
Slays your giants
And leads you home

These days
My life is a song
It's very long
So I'll sing it that much louder
Don't take it hard when I go
It's okay
Love's gonna carry me home

Someday
Love's gonna carry me home.

You see, in spite of it all, in places and in people where we least expect and sometimes don't want to look for him, God comes to us, and rebuilds our true home. Christ is "home" for Christmas and always. You can count on him.