

I

*There's no place like home for the holidays, for no matter how far away you roam, if you want to be happy in a million ways, for the holidays, you can't beat home sweet home.*

So proclaims 20<sup>th</sup> century American theologian Perry Como.

I've been pondering his words in recent days as our little family prepares to celebrate our first Christmas here in our new home here in Georgia.

II

Home. That's such a strange word, isn't it? For every person in this room, that word brings up a different set of images, a different spot on the map, and oftentimes, a set of mixed emotions. For some of us, the word home makes us feel warm and safe – connected and rooted to a community and a sense of place in the world. And for some of us, the word home brings up painful memories. It calls to mind a place we couldn't wait to leave, and even perhaps a place we have vowed to never return.

Perry Como may insist that there's no place like home for the holidays, but home is a loaded word that carries with it many different emotions, depending on your point of view.

III

And that brings us to our story for today. This Fall, we've been tracing the broad outline of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. All along, we've been

reminding ourselves that these stories are rooted in the real, lived experience of real people, people much like you and me, people trying to make sense of their lives in the midst of a complex and ever-changing world.

And as we've seen all along, our ancestors have had a complex relationship with the word "home." Way back in September, we read the story in Genesis of God's call to a 75-year-old man named Abraham and his wife Sarah, when God said, "Leave your home. Leave your your country and your kindred and go to the land that I will show you, and there I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed." And so at the age of 75, Abraham and Sarah picked up stakes and left home for points yet unknown, eventually settling in a place we've come to know as the Land of Promise.

We turned the page and read in the book of Exodus about how, because of a worldwide food shortage, Abraham and Sarah's descendants were forced to leave their homeland in search of food. They became refugees, settling in the land of Egypt. We read how a new king came to power, a king who saw refugees and immigrants not as neighbors made in the image of God, but as a threat to Egypt's national security and notions of racial supremacy, and so the Egyptian king subjected them to forced slave labor.

We read about how God heard the cries of our ancestors remembered the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and then God led God's people out of Egypt through the Red Sea with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand.

But we also read that God send our people straight home. It took only a second to get God's people out of Egypt, but it took forty years to get the Egypt out of the hearts of God's people, and some might say that it's still a work in progress.

And we know that because once they returned to the Land of Promise, our ancestors decided that their neighbors would never take them seriously unless they had a king, and so they demanded that God provide them with one. God said, in Ryan's Revised Translation of the Hebrew, "My children, all I've ever wanted is to be your God and for you to be my people. A king is a bad idea. A king will tax you into oblivion. A king will conscript your sons into his army. A king will take your daughters as his concubines. Trust me, a king is a bad idea." And the people listened to God's warnings about kings and said, "No, we want a king."

And so we read about kings of ancient Israel. We read about the day when King David brought the ark of the covenant and placed it in the center of his new capital city of Jerusalem. We read about how his successor King Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem to house the ark of the covenant. For a

moment, it looked like our ancestors were finally home.

But just as God had warned, almost all of the ancient kings of our ancestors were focused on preserving their own power through any means necessary. We read about how because of a failure of moral leadership, the unity of the kingdom began to fracture, and then it split in two. We read about how foreign adversaries began to interfere more and more in the affairs of the people of God, and the kings of Israel and Judah became ever more corrupt and beholden to foreign empires.

And then it all came crashing down – first about 800 years before Christ, when the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians, and then about 600 years before Christ, when southern kingdom fell and Jerusalem was ravaged by the Babylonians. The walls of the ancient capital were breached, the temple was ripped down, and scores of God's people were forcibly removed from their homes and made to live as slaves and exiles in a foreign land.

And that's where we pick up our story today. It's a little more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Foreign empires continue to battle for dominance on the world stage and for control of the land of promise. And when we come to our text for this morning, the Babylonian Empire has now been conquered by the Persian Empire. The Persian King, a man named Cyrus, has a different foreign

policy toward the people of God than that of his Babylonian predecessors. Cyrus decrees that all people who have been taken captive by Babylon are now free to go home.

And so after forty years of exile, the people of God begin to head home. Some of them are old enough to remember what Jerusalem was like before the Babylonian destruction. And some of them were born in Babylon and only know Jerusalem through the stories their elders have told about them. And all of them begin to return to the Land of Promise.

And so with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from Ezra 1:1-4, 3:1-3 and 10-13.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver

and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening.

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

“For he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures  
forever toward Israel.”

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so

that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

It's quite a picture that Ezra paints for us, isn't it? Here are our ancestors, finally back in Jerusalem after a devastating invasion, finally beginning to rebuild after forty years of exile, finally home again. The foundation of the temple has been restored. The priests are dressed in their vestments. The trumpets are blowing. It is a day for celebration, and rightly so.

But Ezra also reports that some of the people of God are weeping, especially those who are of the older generations. These are the ones who lived through the Babylonian invasion. These are the ones who are old enough to remember what the temple looked like before it was destroyed. And they begin to weep. And there are enough of them so that the sound of the weeping could not be distinguished from the sound of the rejoicing, and it's all so loud that the sound can be heard from far away.

#### IV

And I wonder about you, my friend. How do you feel about being home for the holidays? Does it bring up warm feelings of being safe and secure, a sense of place and connectedness and

rootedness? Or does it bring up feelings of sadness, feelings of longing, or perhaps, even feelings of anger and resentment? Does this season cause you to shout for joy, or to weep in sorrow? Or maybe both?

Here's the truth. Both perspectives can be brought into this house of worship and placed before the throne of the Lord. It's OK if you experience this as a season of great joy, and it's also OK if you experience this as a season of great sorrow. It's OK if you experience this as a season to be eagerly anticipated, and it's also OK if you experience this as a season to be painstakingly endured.

Because the God we worship and serve knows what it's like to have a complex relationship with the idea of home. As we will proclaim again Tuesday evening, when he became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, he was born away, in a manger, no crib for his bed.

His name is Emmanuel – which means God with us. And what God wants more than anything else in the world is to be in relationship with you. So my friend, whether you shout or whether you weep, whether you're old or whether you're young, whatever you bring before God this day, it is welcome in this place.

#### V

Last Sunday morning, I had the privilege of sitting there on the front pew for most of the worship service as

our musicians led us in our service of lessons and carols. And as I looked up into the choir loft, I took note of two women. One of them was born in the year 1928. One of them was born in the year 2008. And I thought to myself, what different perspectives these two women must have on so much – different lenses through which they experience the world, different views on our nation and its place in the world, on our church and its place in our community, and the list goes on. And yet there they both were, blending their voices together, lifting them up before God.

And I thought – there’s a little picture of the church, right there - where a 91-year-old and an 11-year-old can come into the house of the Lord together.

Where else but the church is it OK for us to publicly rejoice and weep all at the same time?

Where else but the church can we blend our voices together so that the sound of our worship, our praises AND our laments, can be heard from far away?

Where else but the church can we be honest about with our complex ideas about home?

And where else but the church can we blend all of that together, and proclaim to one another and the world, “The Lord is good, and God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.