

1/3/10 – Sermon by Rev. Emily Carrington-Heath

Jeremiah 31:7-14

31:7 For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel."

31:8 See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.

31:9 With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

31:10 Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."

31:11 For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

31:12 They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again.

31:13 Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

31:14 I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

Homecomings are tricky things. Thomas Wolfe once wrote a book about a young man who tried to return to the home, and the memories, he once had. When he tried to do so, he finds that town gone and those memories forever changed. The lesson of the novel: you can't go home again.

That phrase has come to have a permanent place in our vocabulary. Many of us have probably heard it said to us as a sort of caution. We've been told that once we leave our homes, or our childhoods, or our places of safety, we'll never really be able to return.

When I left my hometown for college, I had every intention to return there. After all, my friends were there, my memories were there, my family was there. Why would I not want to return.

But by the end of my first semester in college, I had a very different perspective. I may have loved my friends and family, but I didn't want to go

home again. I'd experienced something new and, with that knowledge, I knew that home would never be the same again.

I was thinking about going home again when I was reading this passage. You see, it's been fifteen years since I left home and I haven't been back in years. Recently many of my high school friends have found me on Facebook, and they've asked me to come visit. So now, after what feels like a lifetime, I'm starting to think about coming home again.

It's a daunting exercise. I know that in all the essential ways, I'm the same person who left that town fifteen years ago. But, that doesn't mean that I'm still recognizable as the same person to those friends. (And, as an aside, I've heard the incredulous question "you're a minister now?" asked one too many times.) Going home, or at least going home and remembering where you have been, is never an easy thing.

I was thinking about that when I read this text from Jeremiah because this text is about a homecoming. When you listened to the text you heard about a group of people coming home from somewhere to a place where they used to live. And, unlike me after my first year at college, these were people who really wanted to get back home.

You may know the story of the Babylonian exile. In the Biblical narrative we're told that the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were taken captive by the Babylonians. A significant portion of the people were physically taken away from Jerusalem to Babylon and there they remained in exile for seventy years.

Now, you have to think about how long seventy years is exactly. Seventy years ago would be 1940. The US hadn't entered World War II yet. Jim Crow was still in effect across the South. A woman wouldn't have been a contender for the presidency, or even a preacher in a pulpit. And if you remember 1940, you were probably very young.

In the same way, the young children who had left Jerusalem seventy years before were now returning as the elders of their people. They were the only ones who remembered what home was. They were the ones who held the memory for all the Jewish people of what life used to be like. They were the ones who held their peoples' hope.

You have to wonder what they were thinking on that trip back. Were they excited? Were they ready? Were they scared? Were they remembering a place that didn't really exist anymore? Or did they wonder if they could really go home again?

I think a lot of us wonder that, to be honest.

Several of my friends have come home from the war in the past few years. They all held different positions in the military. Some were officers, some enlisted. Some were in combat arms, some were medics. But almost all of them had one thing in common: when they came home, things were not the same. Because even if the places they had left hadn't changed, they had. And most people, even the people who loved them best, didn't understand that.

They had seen things that most people never have to see. They had lived in a kind of exile that most never have to experience. And they had forever been transformed by it.

But it's not just those who go to war who find it hard to go home again. Any of us who has ever been through something that the people we love best haven't know what's it's like to feel on the outside even at home.

When I was in college one of my friends told me that she wouldn't be going home for Thanksgiving break. When I asked why she explained that her parents had found out she was gay and had told her not to come home anymore, at least not until she was ready to say she wasn't really gay. But she couldn't do that. She couldn't go home and forget who she was. And so, she couldn't go home again.

But it doesn't have to be as dramatic as war or family rejection. It can be something a lot more subtle than that. It can be the feeling that we have changed. It can be the realization that we're not who we used to be. It can be the understanding that a lifetime has gone by, and the place we used to think of as home no longer exists.

But that's the incredible thing about this text. Just when we think it's too late. Just when we think that there is nothing in the world that can make things right again. Just when we declare "I can't go home again", we find out that we can.

We're told in this text that the people were gathered by God back into Jerusalem. We are not told that only some of the people came. It wasn't just the wealthy, or the priests, or the able-bodied. We're told that the frail, those who couldn't walk, those who were nursing, those who were mourning, all returned as well.

They went home. They went home with their memories. They went home with their histories. They went home with their pain and their loss and their grief. And it turns out, in the end, that they could go home again.

The grace of this text is not that we can just go home again and have everything the way it used to be. The grace of this text is that God brings us out of our exiles while understanding where we have been. God brings us home, and allows us to carry with us everything we have experienced. God acknowledges our pain, and our weeping, and yet still is able to bring us home.

We're told that God tells God's people that in the homecoming "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow."

Jeremiah is talking about returning to Jerusalem here. He is talking about leaving Babylon and going to a place that the people have remembered for years. He is talking about the restoration of God's people to their rightful home. But he's also talking about something else.

Because the Jewish people are not just going home to Jerusalem. They're going home to a God who knows us and understands them. They're going home to a God who knows who they have been and who welcomes them back with open arms. They're going home to a God who knows their pain, and who consoles them as a parent. And they find that they can go home again.

In a few minutes we will celebrate Holy Communion together. There are many different Christian interpretations of what happens in Communion, and I'm not going to debate which one is right here. But one which those of us in our tradition often point to is that Christ is spiritually present in the bread and the wine which we receive.

As one of my professors in seminary put it, when we take Communion, we are lifted up into the presence of God. We become joined with God and with other believers not just here in this sanctuary but in every place and every time in which others take or have taken this sacrament.

In other words, when we take Communion we are taken home. We are given just a small foretaste of heaven. We are given just a glimpse of the home

that God is preparing for us. Our true home. We momentarily escape the exiles of the world for loving embrace of a God who knows our histories and accepts us completely.

This is the God whom this text speaks of. This is the God who leads us out of the exile. This is the God who brings all of us home, even the parts that only we and God can understand. This is the God who knows the roads we have taken, and who holds us close and heals us. This God understands the toll our exile has taken on us when no one else does. And this God will bring us home. Because, in the end, we can go home again. Amen.