

Going Home
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

²¹ Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

²² He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

²³ He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

²⁴ No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

²⁵ "To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God"?

²⁸ Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40: 21-31,NIV)

Introduction and Comments:

Our text today about the Jews' anticipation of going home reminded me of the story of a Grandma and Grandpa remembering some of their good ole days. The elderly couple were sitting in their porch rockers watching the beautiful sunset and reminiscing about "the good old days". Grandma turned to Grandpa and said, "Honey, do you remember when we first started dating you used to just casually reach over and take my hand?"

Grandpa looked over at her, smiled and taking the hint took her hand in his. With a wry, little smile, Grandma pressed a little farther, "Honey, do you remember how after we were engaged, you'd sometimes lean over and suddenly kiss me on the cheek?"

Grandpa leaned, slowly now, over to Grandma and gave her a kiss on her cheek. Grandma with an even bigger smile said, "Honey, do you remember how, after we were first married, you'd kind of nibble on my ear?" Grandpa slowly got up from his rocker and headed into the house. Alarmed, Grandma said, "Honey, where are you going?"

Grandpa replied, "To get my teeth!"

Sermon:

The passages from Second Isaiah that we've heard this morning come from a longer section that is, as I said, all about remembering and going home. The writer of Second Isaiah, a prophet, poet, and literary genius writes either shortly before or just after repatriation of the Jews to Judea and speaks to God's people in glowing terms about returning to Judea and rebuilding after some fifty plus years in exile. However, as a side note, little did the Jews expect God's blessing and helping hand to come from, of all people, their Persian overlord, Cyrus the Great.

On several occasions, I have had to go back to my home town. On each occasion, I came away understanding the old saying that we can never really go home again. Things changed, the people I once knew had changed, I had changed, and the reality of home never lived up to my memories and expectations. So, it was with the Jews and their going home.

Later, in what is known as Third Isaiah and in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see the Jews experiencing the stark reality of going home to a devastated, ill inhabited Judea and Jerusalem. But, let's not get so reality oriented that we rob ourselves of the power and hope of what it means to think about going home again.

Second Isaiah centers his message about going home within his understanding of the sovereignty of God over the entire cosmos and in Israel's history of God's faithfulness in past deliverances. The author also holds up God's faithfulness to divine promises of judgment and punishment. The author in the voice of God belittles the rulers of this earth, their plans and schemes, their great accomplishments, and their sense of earthly power. In the end, all people go the way of life into death; wherein, God's sovereignty cannot be disputed and the pagan gods are revealed to be no gods at all. In these passages, God through the words of the prophet disabuses people of the idea about a god's power predicated on winning military victories. The proof of the god of Israel's power lies in the dependable and unremitting continuity between what God said and what God does in all aspects of life.¹

In the opening lines of Second Isaiah, we hear God commissioning angelic beings to comfort the people in their despair and doubt, telling them that God's abiding love and presence is

¹ Klein, Ralph W. "Going Home—A Theology of Second Isaiah," <http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc4/going.pdf>, p 198

and has been with them even during their punishment. In addition, God now says that the people have suffered more than enough for their idolatry and unrighteousness, and they will soon be going home in style. We later learn that this over-plus of suffering is for the benefit of the nations and is imputed to them for their salvation.

Also in the opening verses of Isaiah 40, angelic beings are told to construct a super highway across the Arabian Desert so that Yahweh, like some ancient victorious general, can lead his people home². The prophet is told to, "Cry!", speak out. The author-narrator-prophet replies, "What shall I cry?" The author is asking what could he possibly say given the history of the people's disloyalty. However, most importantly, by what authority will the prophet speak? The voice concedes that even though God's people's commitment has at times been as transitory as the grass and flowers that wither and die, the one thing that is sure and is the prophet's authority to speak is, "The word of our God will stand forever."³ This is a truth for the people to live by without fear or doubt.

As Homer W. Smith quotes W. K. Clifford in his book Man and His Gods, " ` ..., truth is not that which we can ideally contemplate without error, but that which we may act upon without fear.'"⁴

This trusting in the truth of the word of God no matter what is an important development in the theology of Israel at this point because the Jews have been stripped of all the external symbols that have been so crucial to their faith - the king, the land, the temple and, the Mosaic Covenant discounted. All the people have left is their collective memories of home, how it had been, how it was supposed to be, and only a faint hint that there may be a remnant of the people who will return to their holy-land home again.

Nonetheless, a question arises: why should the prophet preach to such a people given their history of fickleness? The people have been wishy-washy in their relationship to God from the beginning despite all that God had done for them. The writer-prophet then goes on to tell the people that God has not abandoned them, God's great love for the people has never left them even as they reaped the consequences of what they had sown. At a time when people doubted God the most, the prophet speaks about a new Exodus, a procession to Zion, prosperity and fertility in the land, a new creation, a new beginning.⁵ In God's unflagging, loving-kindness, God is going to bring the people back home and reestablish them once again. So, people look to the future full of promise and blessing back home.

As I researched our scriptures this morning, I was very aware of the nationalistic and corporate dimensions of these texts and how such understandings could be relevant to us and our nation to today. I don't see our nation in the Exile phase of God's judgment, although we are captive to certain foreign interests and influences. I see our nation today in the moral, ethical, and spiritual decline phase that leads to profound consequences in the greater scheme of God's will and ways.

However, I realized that with just a little stretch of the imagination one could see an individual or personal dimension to God's healing and restorative forgiveness at work in our texts also. I say this with the full understanding that in the ancient worldview, as in many places today, the corporate or collective consciousness was embedded in the individual's consciousness - a person was the people and the people were the person.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Smith, Homer W. Man and His Gods. Little, Brown, and Company: Boston, 1952, p. 413.

⁵ Ibid, p. 199

As products of a post-enlightenment and a scientifically oriented worldview, we are more acutely aware of our aloneness and individuality than were the ancients. In this personal awareness, many people see themselves as just lone individuals rooted in nature more than as someone rooted in a group or family. As modern-day Christians, however, many of us have more of a sense of ourselves as individuals being rooted in God's nature and presence in the Christ, beyond our group affiliations and identities. Furthermore, as devout people, we strive to maintain our relationship with the holy through prayer, worship, service to others, and our personal moral stances in respect to the rest of the world.

Nonetheless, sometimes we as individuals and as a people knowingly break our relationship with the holy just as the ancient Jews did by doing things that we know to be contrary to God's will or not doing things in keeping with divine mandates. In such cases, particularly if such a state is protracted and painful, a person may come to feel that God is far away just as the ancient Jews. People in such cases often ask, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" During pain, loss, shame, alienation, and uncertainty, we desperately need something to hold on to, something to empower us until things run their course. I think one such anchor is the hope of going home; that is, returning to a time and existential place where we felt safe and secure in God's will and ways.

The prophet/writer of our scriptures today gives us great insight into such feelings and hopes. The prophet tells the collective body of people as well as the individual embedded in that consciousness that they should remember all those times in their pasts, when they saw the hand of God at work for their benefit and realize that God is still at work in their lives to the extent that people will acknowledge God and allow God to work in and with them. Often these presences can be seen in uncomfortable purging, refining, and educating through the consequences of people's choices and actions.

Furthermore, God is Creator/Sustainer of all reality and there is more going on in anyone moment than we can comprehend; but hang tough, trust that the One that hung the sun, moon, and stars, who has delivered us in the past will deliver us in the future. And, if our deliverance, if our going home to God's healing, forgiving grace is not as spectacular as we may have imagined it, God is nonetheless there to help us cope with and accommodate new realities and to bless us in our new context.

All this is to say, trust that the God of forgiveness and loving-kindness, who has delivered us in times past, is going to bring us back into a positive spiritual and moral relationship if we will repent and work with God. How is this to be done, how will we come to feel that we are in God's spirit you may ask? Well, we do it by the numbers. We start with the basics, walking humbly with our God, acknowledging our dependence on God and forsaking our delusions of self-sufficiency. We observe the letter of God's moral code, doing justice, being kind, merciful, and charitable. And in so doing, I believe something will overtake us and we will experience an over-plus of feeling-knowledge that tells us we are back, we are back home, that feeling place of peace, assurance, and good will.

I hasten to add that this feeling-knowledge is not a thing that can be looked for or found in and of itself, but rather, it is a by-product of living out of God's will in every moment of our lives. In that feeling-knowing place, we will feel whole again, knowing without a doubt that we have been revived by the power of God at work in us. But, I caution us to be prepared at times to be helped along by the least expected people, who may come into our lives, offering us a "New Beginning." Never, never rule out how God can and will come to us.

In summary, what it means to experience the blessings of God to a large degree is to experience and participate in the collective blessing and presence of God's people. Yet, thanks to God's loving power and presence in Jesus Christ, and the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit, we understand that no matter what happens to us as members of a group and its choices, our

personal relationship to God in Jesus Christ ensures us that God will do the divine best for us as individuals, all things considered - now and forevermore.

Therefore, for those who may at times feel alienated from the holy, the journey home begins by making wide the way; facing and leveling all moral and ethical impediments; tamping down the bumps of complacency and indifference; straightening out all the radical life curves and kinks to build a smooth and straight way leading home.

When we sometimes grow weary of trying to live a Christ-like life in a world that seems diametrically opposed to God's ways and we feel helpless in the face of temptations, remember the prophet's words:

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak. ... ³¹ but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

The Jews went home, it wasn't like they had imagined, but it sure was good to be back in God's good graces and given another chance on holy land, home.