

Jeremiah 31:7-14 2 Christmas 1/03/10 Pastor Bill Uetricht

One of the primary stories of the Bible—Marcus Borg calls it a macro-story, big story—is that of exile, not being home. Our first lesson from Jeremiah deals with that story. I've often wondered how modern types like us can relate to this story. What I frequently discover as I talk about this story publically is that modern people relate to it quite well. Walter Brueggemann, one of the premier Old Testament scholars of our era, says that it is the primary story of our time.

This past week I was home. That is to say, I was in Cincinnati, the place where I am from. Honestly, I haven't lived at "home" for well over thirty years, yet still often we call Cincinnati "home." Going home always gets me thinking. And as I stand on this side of the experience of going home I find myself thinking about home and the experiences of modern exile, of feeling distant from home.

My son Micah and I spent an afternoon together during our stay at "home" exploring inner-city Cincinnati. And while eating at a vegan restaurant that he had chosen we began to speak of our recent experiences of being "home." At one point I said to him, "You know, our family gatherings have never been characterized by exuberant joy. They, for the most part, have not been filled with life and energy. Getting people to talk is sometimes a big accomplishment." I am sure that it doesn't help that we are German. For many Germans, and I am certain that this is not true for those of you who are of Scandinavian background, life is quite serious. Too much exuberance is sometimes thought to be a bit frivolous. Don't you realize that you have to get up for work tomorrow?

Yet I am struck with what Jeremiah says today: “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations.” As he describes the homecoming of the exiles, he says, “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion. They shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord . . . The young women will rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry.” The invitation from Jeremiah today is an invitation to joy and exuberance. Being at home is reason for joy. Home and joy are thought to belong together. Yet so often, joy evades us. The home that joy is is far, far away.

I couldn't help but notice the young adults who were part of our family's gathering last Sunday. At one point most all of them were sitting together on a couch, and all who were there on the couch had some kind of hand-held device that was preoccupying their attention. No one was talking with anybody else; each was busy playing with screens. Technology promises us so much. It promises us that we can be connected—always! Never do we have to be away from messages people are sending us. Never do we have to be away from the all-important phone call. We are always connected, supposedly always at home, for connection is what home is often associated with. And yet it seems that we are increasingly distant from one another. We find it hard to talk in person. We are given the promise of home, yet, truthfully, we live in a foreign land. Exile is not far from any one of us.

Today's gospel lesson focuses on the word “word,” “logos” in the Greek. “In the beginning was the logos, the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” The word “word” or “logos” is not simply referring to those five or seven letter verbal events that come out of our mouths. In the ancient Greek world “logos” referred to the rhyme, the reason, the order, the purpose of life. From the very

beginning God's purpose, God's order existed. It was a partner with him, even at creation. And in Jesus, John tells us, that purpose became a human being.

It's as if to say that in Jesus the meaning of life itself has been revealed. How often, though, we feel as if we are exiled from what life is all about. Life's meaning and purpose seem sometimes for us to be as far away as home was for the exiles of Israel. Sometimes that is because of what we do, because of the poor choices we make. Yet sometimes it is because of what life does to us. An eleven-year old boy, one of our own, Chance Nash, dying because of a sledding accident. Who can make sense of that? Who can discover life's rhyme or order when that is what life gives us? We complain about children who play with screens all day long. We want to see them go outside, hit the sledding hills. And then this happens. No wonder sometimes we experience exile from life's meaning or purpose! That purpose seems to evade us.

I must admit that as I reflect on exile, I can become a bit depressed. Often we live far from the home of joy that has been given to us. Connection, while seeming to be the promise of the technologically-savvy world we live in, frequently is not what we know and live within. Always connected we are so phenomenally disconnected. And who could argue with the truth that life's purpose and meaning seem so far away sometimes? Who can make sense of what seems to be a remarkably disorderly world? It is all so very depressing.

Yet the readings for today do not at all want us to be left in despair. The promise from Jeremiah is that God is in the business of gathering exiles. "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.” The promise is that God is a gathering God, a God who desires to bring back home those who have been exiled from home, exiled from joy, exiled from relationship, exiled from life’s meaning and purpose. God has a heart for those who feel that home evades them. He especially cares for those for whom the journey in life is particularly tough, that is, the vulnerable. Those who are coming home are not just the strong. Those who are coming home are the disabled, the pregnant, the ones giving birth, the dying children, the grieving parents and grandparents, the ones who can barely hold their heads up, barely put one foot in front of the other. God is gathering them all together . . . at home.

In my study this past week I learned that the Greek word “word” or “logos” that I mentioned earlier comes from a word meaning “to gather.” Words come as the result of eyes and brains gathering together letters, images, and probably even sounds. John says that in Jesus the word became flesh. In Jesus the God who gathers life together, who gathers exiles together has become a part of the life that exiles know, has entered the life where joy seems to be far away, where relationships are distant, where meaning and purpose are like foreign lands. That which gathers life and people together, that which gives life purpose and meaning has become a part of life. It is not an idea in the sky. It has become a human being. The word has become flesh.

Now I have to admit that that doesn’t answer all the questions for me. Life’s order still can evade me. I still don’t get it all too often. Yet this I know, and this I trust: in the midst of real life, concrete life,

broken life, life lived in exile is a God who gathers together, a God who loves. Jesus, the word made flesh, isn't the sure sign that life is neat and orderly, that parents and grandparents always die before their children or grandchildren, that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punishment. No, Jesus, the word made flesh, is the sure sign that God gathers together broken and exiled people to his own heart. He is the sure sign that love is at the center of what life means.

Love is gathering us together even on this day. And one day love will bring them from the land of the north, the land of the south, the land of the west and the east—one day love will gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the most vulnerable, the neediest, the ones farthest from home. Love one day will bring them all home to be exiled no more.