

Proper 06 B 2018

Ezekiel 17: 22-24, Mark 4: 26-34, 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10; 14-17

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“At Home, but Still Restless.”

I imagine that one of the most powerful words in any human language is the word “home.” And it almost always has positive implications, like in those age-old phrases: Home Sweet Home; Home Is Where the Heart is; and, of course, There’s No Place like Home. That word, “home,” I think touches us all in ways we can’t always understand, and I believe that all people long for a place to call “home.”

As it works out, “home” is a powerful theme that has been woven throughout the Bible. For example:

Adam and Eve screw up in a big way, and are expelled from their garden home.

Cain murders his brother Abel, and is condemned to wander the earth with no place to call home. (*Aside: I think it’s interesting that, for God, the just and equitable punishment for murder is loss of home.*)

Abraham and Sarah, elderly and childless, and yet honored and revered in their home in Ur of the Chaldees, leave that home for the promise of a new home, and descendants.

Jacob, son of Isaac, cheats his twin brother Esau out of his birthright, and for reasons of safety has to flee his home.

Years later, when famine hits the homeland of Jacob and his 12 sons, and their families, they decide to make a new home in Egypt, where there is plenty to go around.

And then, there is the story of the Israelites, recently released from their bondage in Egypt, who wander in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting to be led to their a new home.

And, finally, there's the story of the exile, when the Jews were taken away into captivity

in Babylon; and for several generations they have only one wish: to return home.

And this just happens to be the background for our reading this morning from Ezekiel, where God is promising to lead his people out of their exile and return them to their home.

And the theme of “home” continues into the New Testament. In the gospels, Jesus is described as someone who comes to make his home with us, but yet has nowhere to lay his head. On one occasion, Jesus was even run out of his hometown. And one of Jesus’ most popular parables is about a son who leaves home with his inheritance, and proceeds to squander it on riotous living. When he finally comes to his senses, he returns home to find his father waiting with open arms.

When we get to today’s reading from Mark’s gospel, we find Jesus telling the parable of the mustard seed that, even though it is one of the smallest of all seeds, yet, when it is planted it grows into this huge, chaotic, unmanageable bush; a bush to which birds go, and in which those same birds make a home in its branches.

Now, the scholarly consensus on this parable is that Jesus was describing his own new movement; though it may start out small and ragtag, it will grow into something that is absolutely huge, and that will attract and welcome people of all sorts and types; people who have been displaced from their own homes. Of course, implicit in this story is the question: “Does this sound like our church?” But that’s a topic for another sermon.

Paul Tournier, the Swiss physician, began his book, entitled *A Place for You*, by describing a young student who came to him seeking help for an anxiety disorder that had been plaguing him for a long time. And this student said to Tournier,

“Basically, I’m looking for a place — for somewhere to be.”

And though this student was speaking out of a deep psychological dysfunction, still his words can resonate with many of us. For, like that student, many of us have felt, at one time or another, like displaced people. We have felt like we were the children of Adam and Eve; that we were children of exile; that we were prodigal sons and daughters. And for us, salvation looks a lot like a

homecoming; like finally arriving at a place where we are welcomed, where we can belong, where we can simply be.

That sounds like a nice place, doesn't it?. But before we get too comfortable in that imagery — of finding a home and settling down — we need to remember what happened to St. Paul.

Paul began his career as a zealous persecutor of Christians. But one day Paul has this experience that turns his life around. And in the course of time, Paul is changed into a man who seeks a closer relationship with Jesus. And we get a sense of what Paul is talking about, in our reading from 2nd Corinthians, when he says

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”

It's a phrase that talks about oneness with Christ, about being at home with Christ. That, in Christ, we find rest from our wandering. In Christ, we find a new home; our true home.

But this is where Paul's story gets interesting. Even though he has finally found his new home in Christ, Paul does not settle

down. In fact, he's as restless as ever. And that seems strange until we remember that, for Paul, to be "in Christ" is to be part of a new creation; to be part of a new world where everything has been put right.

But Paul can look out at the world around him and see that everything hasn't yet been put right; there are many, many people who are not yet "in Christ." There are many people who are still wandering, still in exile, still homeless. And Paul cannot rest until his world has been transformed, and renewed. And so Paul travels from city to city, setting up one community after another — communities of welcome, communities of grace, communities of hope — and Paul is doing all this because he wants to do his part to lead as many people back to a new home "in Christ."

I have long appreciated this quote from St. Augustine:

"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Lovely words, aren't they? Well, nowadays, I tend to think that perhaps Augustine was only half-right. Yes, certainly "in Christ"

we find rest for our restless hearts. Yes, “in Christ” we come home. But until every member of the human race has been transformed and renewed, and welcomed into their new home, we will all still, like Paul, feel the restlessness that is God’s Spirit stirring us out of our slumbers. Stirring us into action. Stirring us to reach further. Stirring us to embrace more widely. And that stirring makes us restless.

Like Paul, we look out into a world that is still in exile. We see a world full of people who are wandering; leaving one home in search of a better new home. And God’s Spirit nudges us, and whispers into our ears, “Yes, *you* are home, but they are not. This is no time for you to rest.”

And that brings me, finally, and in closing, to a quote from William Booth, the man who founded the Salvation Army. He is someone who will probably be forever associated with the plight of the homeless and the destitute. Listen to what Booth once said:

“While women weep, as they do now, I’ll
fight;

“while little children go hungry, as they do
now, I’ll fight;

“while men go to prison, in and out, in and
out, as they do now, I’ll fight;

“while there is a drunkard left,

“while there is a poor lost girl upon the
streets,

“while there remains one dark soul without
the light of God,

“I’ll fight — I’ll fight to the very end!”

These are, I believe, the words of a restless soul who has
found his new home “in Christ.” And yet, whose homecoming has
made him more restless than ever.

Amen.