

Advent III
Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 1:18-25
December 15, 2019
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Last August I was looking for a place in which to hike while on vacation and stumbled upon Carl Sandberg's home in Flat Rock, NC. A working farm nestled against a gentle, sloping mountain, it was chosen by Sandberg as a place to settle after World War II in order to bring his extended family together, provide a setting for his writing and his wife's prize-winning goats. What I had anticipated as a couple of hours hiking turned into an entire afternoon of learning more about Sandberg's life, as a first generation American, who left school at 14 because his family needed him to work and spent several months riding the train, getting off and on looking for work. His writing talent was noticed early, even as his fame grew his initial passion never wavered from its impulse to give voice to those without one, whether by virtue of industrialization, racial injustice or poverty.

The house is a simple, white Colonial, situated between the mountain and a small lake. Next to the house are the barns, and beyond the barns are the fields leading up into the mountain. I hiked among the quiet woods, petted the goats, listened to the water rush over rocks and watched a fat snake sun itself on another. The beauty of the natural surroundings was obvious, but also palpable was the sense of home, of a place where love, struggle, cherished relationships, and purposeful work had come together. I could feel it despite the reality that the home has been a national park since 1974. What makes a place a home?

Images of home get brought out each December, in these weeks leading up to Christmas. We decorate our homes. We have open houses. We post pictures of family togetherness around fires, tables, and trees. "I'll be home for Christmas" plays, repeatedly, on the radio. I remember being a college kid in mid-December, anxious to board that plane and fly home, dreaming about the comforts of my old bedroom, the way the sunshine came streaming through the kitchen window, and how good the carrot cake smelled baking in the oven. The longing for home was never fully fulfilled by actually going home – but the hope returned as reliably as exams – each December.

Frederick Buechner defines "home as the place where you feel you belong and that in some sense belongs to you."¹ He called his grandmother's house home; so designated because of its permanence, familiar beauty, and, most importantly, because it held a woman, a grandmother, who delighted in knowing him. Home had, he continued, "a sense of charity and justice and order and peace." Where is the place where you feel you belong and that belongs to you? Home.

¹ Buechner, Frederick, "The Longing for Home" in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 221.

The Israelites had been living in exile – the opposite of home - when Isaiah writes a vision of the desert blooming, the sands becoming pools, and a holy way breaking forth back to Zion. Five hundred miles of desolation lay between their current situation and the site of their longings, hopes, and dreams. Miles of sand, wind, extreme temperatures, and wild animals made up the distance between familiarity and strange surroundings, between battle-weary bodies and wholeness, between freedom and enslavement, between survival mode and flourishing. Into their homesickness, Isaiah offers a vision of going home; a way being made upon which even a fool cannot get lost.

When you are separated from the place where you belong, it is inevitable that visions of better days will flood your thinking. Let me go home said the college kid 1000 miles away. Can I please have my home back said the war refugee. Will I ever find the road back to myself wondered the traumatized survivor. You don't have to be a prophet or a poet to imagine going home.

But Isaiah was not writing of a path that had existed before the enemy armies demolished Jerusalem. Even after the Israelites were allowed to return to their land, the road home did not fill with crocuses blooming abundantly, the eyes blinded in war were not miraculously healed, water did not burst forth like a spring in the desert. The way between exile and sanctuary was still long, hidden and filled with peril.

Instead, Isaiah's poetry offers something beyond the ordinary – the promise of God for a healed earth, a healed humanity, a holy way along which joy surprises us, and the road back to God is clear. Even those of us who could never write the vision or sing the song hold the dream of such a homecoming inside our hearts, a hope that returns reliably each Advent. It is nothing less than the longing for God. Perhaps what has felt so painful this season is the ugly, inescapable truth that we live far from home, in an exile of our making, and the roads we travel are filled with anger, injustice, wailing rather than charity, justice, and peace.

Home, particularly God's home, is not always predictable. Surely Joseph during his engagement to Mary imagined the two of them creating a home together. Surely his dreams did not include being a father to a child that was not his, contemplating his fiancée's behavior, and wondering if he should walk away from the whole thing. But somehow Joseph was able to trust his dream, to let the angel speak into his open heart assuring him amid his fears and pain that God was working. Name him Jesus, the angel instructs, Emmanuel, God with us. As Joseph did he learned that God was with him, dreaming dreams beyond Joseph's imagining. The home Joseph and Mary create, the family they become, is not what they expected; but through their faithfulness the earth rejoices, the way to God is made clear, wide, and available.

So strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble hearts, say to those who are afraid, Be strong. Here is your God. There may be more than five hundred miles

between exile and home, more heartaches, and joy, between anger and charity, but God is with us.

When Frederick Buechner was a young adult he wandered one Advent into church, and heard the preacher ask, "Do you want to go home for Christmas?" "Why, yes, I do," Buechner thought. Home is found at the manger, the preacher suggested. Home is wherever Christ is.² More and more I believe Christ shows up where we least expect, found with the hurting, the maimed, the exile, the stranger, the bewildered, the weak ones we ignore, the despised ones we pretend not to see. "I have not yet found my way home," concluded Buechner. But as I have tried to be a life-giver, offer others something of the life-saving power of Christ, I find in those moments I am closest to truly being home. I have not found home but I have found the way to it."³

What is home for you? Are you still looking for it? Is there order, comfort, mercy or peace that you can offer to another, helping you both find the road toward God. God is with us. When we offer something of Christ's presence to another, we have found the road home.

² Buechner, 234.

³ Ibid.