

“Welcome Home”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3: 14-20

In these days leading up to Christmas, there will be a lot of homecomings taking place. Family will travel from great distances to be together over the Christmas holiday. College students will return home after being away at school for the fall. We see it here at the church, as people who once attended here but have since moved away return for worship services while back visiting family and friends. Homecomings are very much a part of the Advent and Christmas Season.

If you want to go somewhere and witness homecomings in one location, probably the best place to go is the airport. We experienced that last Saturday, as we welcomed Erin home from her first semester of college. As Debbie and I waited in that beautiful great hall of the Indianapolis International Airport, we saw all sorts of homecomings taking place. Grandparents reuniting with children and grandchildren; parents welcoming daughters and sons home; groups of families and friends embracing loved ones with hugs and kisses and gifts and balloons. And then we had our moment to see and welcome our daughter home – as with all homecomings, a joy-filled moment in time.

But as we stood there last Saturday, I also had memories of a different kind of homecoming almost two years earlier. It was there that Debbie and I waited for her mom and brother to return home from Hawaii, where her father had died while they were on vacation. The embrace we shared with them on that particular homecoming was filled with tears and sobs and a sense of relief that they were home, even as they carried with them the remains of her dad. It was a reminder to me that coming home can hold many different meanings through many different situations we encounter in life.

In our world, people are constantly searching for home. In the midst of school shootings and stock market anxiety and crazy rush hour drivers and challenging medical diagnoses, we are all yearning for a place to be welcomed and received and entrusted to God’s care. We live in a chaotic, often turbulent world. And the most any of us would ask for is a warm embrace in being welcomed home.

The world in which Zephaniah lived was much like our own. His people, the Israelites, were in exile, taken away by their enemies. Their home was behind them, their safety net was gone, and they were hopeless.

Joanna Adams describes it this way: *It’s out of character for Zephaniah, one of the gloomiest of the Old Testament prophets, to offer*

this joyful song of promise: "I will remove disaster from you. I will gather the outcast. I will bring you home, says the Lord." Zephaniah took special delight in predicting "the day of the Lord," when things were going to turn out badly for the people of Judah and Israel. Zephaniah could give the Grim Reaper a run for his money.

Because the bright message of the lectionary reading is strikingly different from the rest of his prophecy, biblical scholars suggest that it was added during the Babylonian exile. What could be more reassuring to people who were far from home than to receive word that there was a place where they belonged.

What happened to our ancestors in faith was this. A foreign enemy had overrun their homes and destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They were bound as prisoners and hauled over hundreds of desert miles to a strange land, where they were forced to live among people whose language, religion, customs and habits were different from theirs.

Adams continues: Sometimes in my own country, I feel as if I am living in a foreign land. I am not referring to the ethnic and religious diversity of our nation, which has thereby made it richer. I am referring to the experiences that make me ask myself, "Who are these people, and where did they learn to behave that way?"

In a doctor's office, the fellow sitting across from me shouts into a cell phone as if no one else is in the room. Beside me a child pitches a whining fit, yet the mother never looks up from her issue of People magazine. Out on the interstate hot-shot drivers whiz dangerously in and out of lanes. It's every man and woman for himself or herself, and I feel far from home . . .

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "The human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of an abiding sense of homelessness." It is as if we never feel quite at home anywhere but are always seeking that sweet place. We press our way through mobbed airport corridors and clogged highways as if our lives depended on getting to a place where we belong for Christmas. We yearn for the day when the distance between time and eternity will be finally and fully bridged; until then, we understand exile.

Families with children make up the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. Think of mothers and fathers trying as best they can to raise their children, but having no homes in which to raise them. Think of the gay son or daughter who wants to come home for Christmas but who fears being judged and rejected by family and by church . . .

Adams concludes: Every once in a while, a member of the congregation I serve says something like this to me: "I am sorry you have not seen me in church for a while, but I have gotten to where I just cannot come any more."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know what happens, but I will come in, get a bulletin and sit down. The choir will start singing, or you will read a passage of scripture, and the floodgates will open. I am in tears. It is embarrassing." Why be embarrassed? Worship is homecoming. It is putting ourselves in the place where it is safe to tell the truth, safe to be who we really are in the presence of the holy and loving God. We come with broken places and unanswered questions. God takes us in, and yes, sometimes it feels so good that we weep from sheer relief.

According to Luke, during the reign of Caesar Augustus all went to their own towns to be registered (Luke 2:3). The pilgrims included Joseph and Mary, who was expecting a child. In the city David called Bethlehem, the baby was born, and as Zephaniah had promised, the exile was over. The Lord our God was here to stay ("Toward Home," Joanna M. Adams, Christian Century, December 12, 2006: 18).

That's all well and good, but many times in life it can be hard to believe the exile is over. Too many times, we are constantly searching for home, even when God is there seeking to welcome us in. Perhaps part of our waiting this Advent is to acknowledge the exiles we live in, and then trust and see that our Lord God is here to stay.

Are you living in the exile of grief and pain? As this holiday season seems to be a joyful frolic for so many around you, instead you are wishing it would be over, so you wouldn't have to live with the emptiness of loss. Whether it's the first Christmas or the thirtieth Christmas, walking through grief in this season is difficult and challenging, to be sure. It can feel as if God is nowhere close, as you yearn for a home where every seat is filled around the dining room table.

And yet God does not abandon us in our exile, and offers us comfort and strength when we acknowledge our pain. We lift those feelings up to God in both individual and corporate prayer and worship, including our annual Blue Christmas Service this Tuesday at 6:30pm. One of our familiar Christmas carols says it best:

"And you, beneath life's crushing load,
whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now, for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing:
O, rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing" ("It Came Upon a Midnight Clear". From your exile, be welcomed into God's love and grace.

Are you living in the exile of fear and anxiety and uncertainty? Perhaps it is the anxiety of loved ones who are all in crisis, and you struggle with balancing your care for them with the sense of purpose and call in your own life of discipleship. Perhaps it is the fear of the unknown - an unknown diagnosis, an unknown job status, an unknown direction in

life – and you are mired in an exile of paralysis waiting for answers. Perhaps it is the uncertainty of a relationship staying together or moving forward, of whether our health will allow us to remain active, of our financial resources being enough to live on. The exile of fear and uncertainty is powerful indeed.

And yet, God knows we are fearful creatures, and over and over again comforts us by saying, “Do not be afraid.” We hear it today from Zephaniah: “Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak” (3:16). In this Advent Season, we hear the Gospel writer Luke speak this truth: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” “Do not be afraid, Mary.” On the night of Jesus’ birth, the angels comfort the shepherds by saying: “Do not be afraid . . . I am bringing you good news of great joy.” And when that child who becomes our Savior is raised from the dead, Matthew tells us: “Do not be afraid . . . he is not here, for he has been raised” (28: 5-6). And why should we not be afraid? “The Lord, your God, is in your midst” (Zephaniah 3:17). From your exile of fear, God will welcome you home as Emmanuel – God with us.

Whatever exiles we are in, God has not abandoned us. God is here, in our midst, and will welcome us home into God’s love and grace. As you wait in this Advent Season, may you receive this good news once again. You are not alone. God will always be with you.

Thanks be to God for welcoming us home in our journey to Bethlehem. Amen.