

Dreaming of Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

December 2, 2018

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Isaiah 65:17–25 (CEB)

¹⁷Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth:
past events won't be remembered;
they won't come to mind. . . .

²¹They will build houses and live in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

²²They won't build for others to live in,
nor plant for others to eat.
Like the days of a tree will be the days of my people;
my chosen will make full use of their handiwork.

Luke 15:11–32 (NRSV)

¹¹Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Can we really go home?

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that two of the most popular Christmas songs are poignant and melancholy. Christmas can be like that, not really living up to our dreams and expectations. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" is from the famed film with Judy Garland, *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Near the end of the story, as the family prepares to move away from their beloved home and friends, Garland sings the song to her little sister to cheer her up. Here are the original lyrics:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas
It may be your last
Next year we may all be living in the past
Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Pop that champagne cork
Next year we may all be living in New York
No good times like the olden days
Happy golden days of yore

Faithful friends who were dear to us
Will be near to us no more
But at least we all will be together
If the Lord allows
From now on, we'll have to muddle through
somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas
now.

Not too much cheery in all that. So, Garland had the lyrics made more encouraging. Nonetheless, even as Garland sang, “let your heart be light,” the melancholy of the original remained, which probably accounted for its popularity among American troops fighting and dying to bring WWII to an end. There are plenty of people still for whom the Christmas season can be pretty hard.

This year’s Advent series is about home, and was inspired by the second melancholy Christmas classic, “I’ll be Home for Christmas,” recorded by Bing Crosby in 1943. It too went on to be especially popular with the troops for good reason. As the Wikipedia entry puts it:

The song is sung from the point of view of a soldier stationed overseas during World War II, writing a letter to his family. In the message, he tells the family he will be coming home and to prepare the holiday for him, and requests snow, mistletoe, and presents on the tree. The song ends on a melancholy note, with the soldier saying, “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams”.

If only in my dreams . . . I suspect that many of us have stories to tell about Christmases past when things did not quite live up to our own dreams. Looking back on the Christmases of my childhood, it is quite easy to conjure them as Norman Rockwell paintings. But I’m pretty sure there were family issues at Christmas even in the 1950’s!

Dreaming of home

When I think about “dreaming of home,” quite a few biblical stories come to mind. Jacob dreaming of home as his exile went on year after year (Genesis 29-33). Naomi deciding to head home after the death of her husband and sons in Moab (the book of Ruth). One of the most thought-provoking is Jesus’ parable about the prodigal son.

After the younger son demands his inheritance, even though dad is still alive, he heads off and squanders all his money, soon beginning a downward spiral to ruin. Eventually, he is tending pigs and eating what they eat. What do you think he dreamed of in those moments? I’d bet he dreamed of home, of being forgiven by his loving father. So, he repented of his debauched life and headed home, where, sure enough, father ran down the road to greet him. Dad was so excited he even threw a big party. But . . . was everything right? No. The prodigal’s brother wanted none of it, resenting the welcome shown his brother. Dreams are like that; reality is often a very different matter.

You and I hear in this parable a story about a father and his sons, but Jesus’ listeners would have heard much more – they would have heard another story about going home, exile’s end. It’s a big story and takes us right to Jesus . . . and the incarnation.

Only a dream?

Nearly six hundred years before Jesus, the Babylonians overran Jerusalem, burned it, and sent thousands of Jews into exile in Babylon. To the Jews, it was like they had been tossed in prison. Believing that they were being punished for their faithlessness toward God, the Jews felt abandoned and stripped of everything they cherished. Yet, in the midst of this exile, prophets brought words of hope and encouragement. Today’s passage from Isaiah is an example of such a promise. New heavens and a new earth – all put right. It was a promise that one day the people’s sins would be forgiven, the exile would end. After all, forgiveness of sins and release of the captives goes hand in hand. No jailer throws open the prison doors unless the punishment has been served. As N.T. Wright wrote, “Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying ‘return from exile.’”¹

Fifty years after the Babylonian exile began, the Jews were allowed to begin returning home. They would have asked themselves, “Has God forgiven our sins? Have the jail doors been thrown open?” In a word, no. They were not free and as the decades turned

¹ From Wright’s, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, 1996. p. 268.

into centuries, it became clear to the Jews that the exile had not ended. They merely traded in one oppressor for another; first the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Egyptians, then the Syrians, and, finally, the Romans. Even as they climbed the southern steps in the grand temple courtyards built by the Roman puppet, Herod, they still awaited the day when God would truly welcome them home, when their sins would be forgiven. In that context, we turn to Jesus' parable, trying to hear it as a Galilean Jew would have heard it 2,000 years ago.

Jesus Tells Three Parables about Coming Home

Any biblical passage is easier to understand if we put it in context. This is true even of the parables. Though each parable is its own self-contained story, you'll find it helpful to look at the paragraphs immediately preceding and following a parable.

In the opening verses of chapter 15, Luke tells us that assorted tax collectors and sinners are gathered around Jesus. Nearby Pharisees are offended that Jesus would welcome all the wrong sorts of people into his company. After all, the Pharisees wouldn't be seen in such company, much less eat with them. Jesus responds to the Pharisees by telling three parables. The first parable is about a shepherd's joy in finding one lost sheep from a flock of one hundred (15:3-7). The second parable is about the joy of a woman who lost a single coin and then found it, after working long and hard to find it (v. 8-10). Finally, Jesus turns to today's parable and a father's joy in finding a long-lost son.

Coming home

So . . . back to the tale of the prodigal. Imagine for a moment that you are in the crowd, hearing Jesus tell this story. You've grown up amidst the remembered pain of exile in Babylon, reading the Scripture called Lamentations. You've cherished the promises in the scroll of Isaiah. And you've resented the iron hand of the pagan Romans. How do you think this story would sound to you? In addition to all else we might find here, of course this is a story of return from exile, of the prison doors being thrown wide open, of the forgiveness of sins. The father is not a jailer or even a judge here; instead, he lovingly waits outside the prison walls for his beloved to emerge. This is the Good News for the oppressed and broken-hearted that "proclaims liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1). It is telling that when Jesus rose in Nazareth to begin his ministry, he chose to read from this very passage in the scroll of Isaiah. Indeed, Jesus was announcing the arrival of the kingdom and the release of the prisoners. God was coming home. (See Luke 4:16-30)².

Christmas dreams

Perhaps, just perhaps . . . even our dreams of Christmas homecomings are a bit impoverished. C. S. Lewis told a story about a little boy who was quite happy playing in the

mud outside his home, not knowing that just a block away were all the thrills and beauty of the beach.

The turkeys and trees, the candy canes and carols, are all wonderful, so far as they go. But do we really grasp what God has given us? What God will give us? The apostle Paul knew that, "For now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12). For even when it comes to Christmas, we often see the light of the incarnation only dimly. It isn't that Christmas as we celebrate it is wrong, but it is only a vague and indistinct portrait of the true home that lies in Christ and will one day be fully realized with his coming. Whatever Christmas dreams we cherish, they will, in the end, be unsatisfying unless they are fully grounded in the truth of Emmanuel.

² The passage from Luke makes clear that Jesus' announcement didn't go over too well, to say the least. Why? Because in announcing the arrival of God's kingdom, he was also implying his own messiahship. The whole village had known Jesus since he was a boy and it must have seemed crazy or even blasphemous to them for Jesus to make such a claim about himself.

Advent is the time for remembering and anticipating the incarnation, the “enfleshing” of God’s own self, not for God’s sake but for our own. The incarnation is both the fulfillment and the promise of God’s determination to create a home in which all is good and right, in which we can live with one another in genuine peace and harmony.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have there been times when “going home” didn’t live up to your expectations? How about Christmases? Share some stories of important times when reality didn’t measure up to the dreams.
2. How big a part of your Christmas does the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, really play? What traditions do you have that help you to remember what Christmas is really all about? How can you use Advent to better prepare you, your friends, and your family?
3. Without looking back, but only forward, what would a perfect, Christ-shaped Christmas look like to you? Who would be there? What can you do now to make your own Advent and Christmas a better window into the kingdom of God?

Daily Bible Readings

More on coming home

Monday, Ezekiel 36:8-15 God brings a message of homecoming (see v. 8)

Tuesday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 A song about Israel’s coming home (see v. 20)

Wednesday, Isaiah 43:25 – 44:3 Israel’s welcome home (return from exile) will mean that Israel’s sins have been forgiven.

Thursday, Ezekiel 37:21-28 God will gather his people together, saving them and cleansing. Do you see here a picture of God’s kingdom?

Friday, Micah 7:18-20 Micah brings a promise from God of a restoration that would be fulfilled in Jesus.

Saturday, 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 Seeing dimly . . . seeing face to face.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: The Good News in *A Christmas Carol*