



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

“Home for the Holidays”

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵*The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,*

he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;

you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶*On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:*

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷*The LORD, your God, is in your midst,*

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

*he will renew you * in his love;*

he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ *as on a day of festival.*

I will remove disaster from you,

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹*I will deal with all your oppressors*

at that time.

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

and I will change their shame into praise

and renown in all the earth.

²⁰*At that time I will bring you home,*

at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised

among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes

before your eyes, says the LORD.

As a fisherman, I marvel at the Pacific Salmon or Chinook. They are large and powerful fish. They also taste wonderful, but that is not the source of my wonder. It is the life cycle of the salmon that fascinates me. They are born in streams and rivers far from the seas and lakes that they will inhabit during their adult life. When they are ready they migrate down the river into the large waters and there they will live for 5-7 years. During

this time, they will travel thousands of miles. They will eat uncountable small fish as they grow to sizes as large as forty pounds. Then in the fall, the mature salmon begin a most amazing journey. No matter where they are in the ocean or lake, they will migrate home to reproduce. Male and female will make this last trip so that the next generation of salmon will exist.

Built into each salmon is a “homing device”. Somehow they will find the mouth of the river where they were born. It might be hundreds of miles away! After they locate this river they will begin the amazing journey home to their birthplace. These mature salmon, about to die, find the strength to swim upstream, jumping obstacles in their way that often reach heights of 6 or 7 feet. Then, at last, they arrive at the creek, or the feeder-stream of the river where they were born and they begin the cycle of life and death again.

I have often wondered about this powerful homing instinct that Salmon have. What is it in their biology that enables them to find their home? There are other places, (some more convenient) where they might reproduce. Why do they seek their home stream? The fisheries biologists have answers, but even their explanations do not remove the awe and wonder from this amazing phenomenon. It is truly a marvel of life.

Human beings are not governed by many instincts. We differ from the other animals of the world by our ability to reflect upon those things which drive us. We are able to subvert many of our instincts, sometimes for the better, sometimes to our own detriment. Yet, I believe that we have a “homing instinct.” It is a spiritual homing instinct. There is something in each of us that longs for home, for the source or ground of our being. It may not be the place of our birth, but it is that place where we felt the comfort and the security that every child and adult needs. Home may not be with our biological families, it may be a school, or a group of friends, but home-coming is a strong drive that each of us has.

I disagree with those who say that this is merely nostalgic. It is not; anything but. I believe that the longing for home, like the journey of the salmon, is fueled by the desire for rebirth and transformation. There is a restless desire in us for “something more”: for something better in life. There is a hunger in the hearts of human beings for a better existence, for a new beginning. So we often seek the place of beginnings... home, hoping that there we will discover life anew and be reborn.

There is the story of Dan Wakefield, a novelist and Hollywood screen writer. He was a “success.” He had it all in the glitz and glitter of Hollywood. Yet, there was a deep pain and longing that alcohol and other substances barely numbed. He entitled the story of his spiritual journey: *Returning*. It is the story of how he returned to his

spiritual roots after wandering in the neon wilderness of Hollywood for thirty years. Returning home for him was a journey of grace and forgiveness. It was a journey of transformation and rebirth.

There is the story of Mary and Joseph. We read that they, by Roman decree, returned to Joseph's hometown. He must have been gone for a long time, because no relative was in Bethlehem who would house him and his pregnant wife. Joseph returned to his ancestral home and there the birth of Jesus occurred... there the rebirth and transformation of humanity began.

There is our story. We are in the midst of the commercial Christmas and the religious Advent. The two dovetail in our experience and often confuse us. Advent is about waiting. Christmas is about the birth of child, the son God, the Messiah. But Advent is also about returning home. The prophet Zephaniah captured this longing in his promise to the Hebrew people who were captive in Babylon or scattered throughout the ancient world.

*I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you..

Home is a place of healing and restoration. Home is where we experience comfort, security and most importantly, hope. All of us have vivid memories of Christmases past. I remember a time early in my ministry when I was living in Missouri. It was a hard year and I was over a thousand miles from anyone in my family. Being a minister means providing for other people's celebration and sadly we clergy often subvert our own needs. I remember how I wanted to go home that year, and how that Christmas Eve, when the last candle was extinguished in the sanctuary, I got in my little Volkswagen bug and drove through the night, for 18 hours, so I could be home on Christmas day.

Christmas is a time of stories. We will read again Dickens *A Christmas Carol*. The television will be filled with the movies of the season, from *It's a Wonderful Life*, to the *Bishop's Wife*. The stories are different, but the theme is the same. It is the human longing for spiritual awakening and rebirth. It is our desire to renew our hope and to believe again. Don't we all want to believe again?

There is a cynical and crusty part of each of us (Dickens called this part "Scrooge"), that wants to eschew such nostalgic nonsense. But it is not nonsense. It takes courage to allow yourself to experience and feel your need for hope, for rebirth and transformation. Can you allow yourself to feel that longing? Can you respond to its

tug on your heart? I sometimes think that the rush to the stores and malls is a superficial attempt to fill that emptiness and satisfy that ancient hunger and longing... Perhaps the new toy, the new outfit, the new gadget will renew our lives... but we have lived with the disappointment of things.

Advent does not point us to the mall, to the Christmas party, to the store, to the tree, to the bearded elf dressed in red. No! Our heart will not find its rest there. Gifts are fun and a wonderful expression of love, but they do not give life and they do not heal. They do not transform us and make us new.... Only one gift does... it is the gift we anticipate together: the child born of Mary and Joseph.

During this season, we discover that the home we long for is found in the heart of one who had no home in which to be born... It is this child, Jesus, who bears the promise of transformation and rebirth for which the human heart longs.

This Christmas season will take us to many places... Many of us will return "home", whether that means family, friends or a special place. The heart seeks the warmth of home during the cold of winter, but also, this Christmastide, respond to the promise of the child Jesus. In the cold winter of the soul... allow the child to be born again in you... and may you be transformed in your seeking.

The good news of the gospel is that we will be brought home... we will be transformed... Thus we can live in hope. Amen.