

The Road Back Home

a sermon

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Isaiah 35:1-10

My father-in-law, Jim, is a really good driver. Every turn is precise. Every maneuver is smooth. At all times, he is aware of his surroundings, what's up ahead, behind and to the sides. Never does he jostle his passengers around.

I don't say this about most people: I *always* feel safe when he's driving.

One reason why he is so good is because Jim has driven a lot, and he's been driving for a long time.

He started when he was maybe nine years old. That's right. My father-in-law grew up on the flat farmlands of western Michigan, in a hamlet that I'm not sure even exists anymore. On a map it looks like an empty space just east of Zeeland and a fair bit south of Hudsonville. He had house and farm chores to do every day, after he went to the school before dawn to feed the furnace, his other job. To get to the school he'd drive there. By himself. No problem.

I don't know if he felt a little scared doing this the first time. I don't know if he worried about finding his way to the school and then back home on that first drive. But knowing Jim, I'd say it isn't likely, and even if he did, I'm sure he soon got over it. When you've got a job to do, you just do it. That's how he is.

For a good number of years, Jim drove a lot for his business. As a manufacturer's rep, he had clients in parts of Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. He would drive to take care of whatever it was he had to take care of, and then he would drive home. Rarely did he stay overnight. Only occasionally did he take the train. Hardly ever did he fly. And I'm sure he almost never got lost. Not getting home. He knew the way.

Not everybody has such skill in driving. And not everybody has such a good sense of direction. Some people lose their way. Some people lose their cool. Some people really shouldn't be driving.

It's great that we now have those GPS devices, the things that use satellite data and built-in maps to tell you where you are and how to get to where you want to be. Sure, they're not perfect. But they can, if used right, make the journey a little easier, maybe even safer, by showing you how to get to "there," wherever "there" is, and back again.

Most of them have this neat feature that lets you set the location for "home," whatever "home" is for you.

Once you've set it, then wherever you are, you just press "home," and you are shown the way: to home; to where you belong; to that most special place of all places; to that place unlike any other, at least for you. "There's no place like home." Take me home.

I'd say, that's pretty comforting.

But it isn't all that easy, is it? Not really, not in the ways that most matter. Because the place where we most belong, the home where we're really at home, is less about maps than it is about hearts.

It's about belonging.
It's about being.
It's about wholeness and health and welcome.

And all of these are so fragile, so very fragile. We want to be home, we want to make our way home. Yet the home we knew

has moved,
or changed,
or been sold,
or been bulldozed to make way for a strip mall,
or collapsed from neglect,
or been abandoned because of divorce or death.

“The Road Home” is a poem by Michael Dennis Browne that he wrote for his friend, the composer Stephen Paulus, to use for a piece for choir. And the whole thing speaks so movingly about the yearning for home, and the way to it.

Here's the first of three stanzas (the others I'll return to):

*Tell me, where is the road
I can call my own,
That I left, that I lost
So long ago?
All these years I have wandered,
Oh when will I know
There's a way, there's a road
That will lead me home?*

This is the question that troubles so many: how do we find the road back home?



In the Bible verses that I read, we hear a promise of a return home:

from exile, from Babylon,
to Jerusalem, to Judah.

The destruction of temple and homeland were in the past. But a future of return, a joyful future soon to arrive? This was unimaginable for some of the Jewish exiles in the city of Babylon. It was almost too much for them, beyond their ability to see or accept or even understand.

Their daily existence was as an exiled people. Day to day, they were aware that the land in which they lived was not their own and did not belong to them. Frequent were the reminders that they did not belong, that they would never really belong, not there, not in Babylon. And the memory of what they used to have and be was a constant source of sorrow.

It was to them — the exiled, the dispossessed, the sorrowing, the despairing — that God promises a return to home.

It does not matter that they are weak and demoralized.
It does not matter that they feel completely unable to make their way home.
It does not matter that they are afraid of the journey.
It does not matter that they feel it impossible even to imagine this happening.
God will show the way. God will make a way. God will prepare the way, and for them
make it smooth and safe.

Hear again a bit of that promise:

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

...

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

*For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert....*

*And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing....*

Imagine the effect of this promise on those who heard it. Consider what it must have sounded like, felt like, how it would have touched them and moved them.

What must that have been like, to hear that God would restore what had been broken and heal what had been wounded and in all that lead them home?

Sure, some wouldn't believe, wouldn't even want to believe. The promise would seem too "out there" to accept. It would feel like too great a risk to give themselves to such hope.

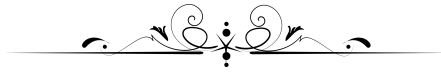
And some would want to believe, but wonder. Could they? Should they? To them, it would also feel like a risk, but maybe, just maybe, they'd be willing to make it, willing to give themselves to such hope, and to reach out to this promise of joy.

And some *would* believe, simply, unreservedly believe, and in hope grasp onto the promise with joy.

*After wind, after rain,
When the dark is done,
As I wake from a dream
In the gold of day,
Through the air there's a calling
From far away,
There's a voice I can hear
That will lead me home.*

God did lead them home, over the road from Babylon to Jerusalem, so that they were restored, to where they belonged.

For God knows the road, and even makes the road, for his dear ones to walk, so they may return home.



But this wasn't a one off. It wasn't a once and done thing, as if it were completely out of God's character to act in such a way, to lead people home, their proper home, even making the roads and highways for them to travel over.

You see, this is what God does, again and again. For God is a homeward-directing God, showing us God's people road home and even making it for them, so they will have a sure path on which to walk.

God leads people home:

from places of wandering
and lands of exile,
by pillar of cloud by day
and pillar of fire by night,
through the challenge of prophets
and the pleadings of priests,
with thundering shouts
and with a still, small voice.

And God did this most of all in Jesus Christ, who came among us, the homeless and lost, to pave with his compassion and his teaching and even with own blood the road back to home, our true home.

He did this, because Jesus knows our home, our true home. Jesus knows where we will truly be at rest, where we can flourish, where we can really be ourselves, who we're supposed to be. He knows this, our true home, because it is his home, too; it is where he lives. And it is our home only because it is first and always *his* home.

Jesus also knows the false homes we inhabit, the places of pretense and make-believe, where we are not truly at home but in exile, homes with names like

“Work,”
“Entertainment,”
“Compulsion,”
“Addiction,”
“Anger,”
“Envy.”

He knows these, because he has walked among them, seen them for what they are, and known them to be not only where we live but also where we are not truly alive, for our home is elsewhere.

So he calls out to us, asking us to follow, singing to us a song of promise and hope and joy, a song so compelling that perhaps we might forsake our fear and abandon our cynicism and grasp onto the promise with hope and joy, and follow him home.

*Rise up, follow me,
Come away, is the call,*

*With the love in your heart
As the only song;
There is no such beauty
As where you belong;
Rise up, follow me,
I will lead you home.*

That line from the song really gets me: “There is no such beauty / As where you belong.”
I *yearn* for that beauty. Don’t you?
I *hunger* for belonging. Don’t you?
And, many days, when I’m listening, and even sometimes when I’m not, I can hear the voice of Jesus calling me: “Rise up, follow me, / I will lead you home.”
Yes, there are days when I hear his voice. How about you?



My friends, to you, God promises that you will return home, a promise seen and proven and made trustworthy in Jesus, who was born and lived and died and rose and ascended in order to bring you home.

It does not matter if you are weak and demoralized.

It does not matter if you feel completely unable to make such a journey.

It does not matter if you are afraid of the journey.

It does not matter if you feel it impossible even to imagine this happening.

God will show the way. God will make a way. God will prepare the way, and make it smooth and safe, so you may return home.

*Blessed be the name of the Lord forever;
may the glory of God fill the earth.
Amen and Amen.
(Psalm 72:19)*