

## HOME COMING

### 1) Looking for Home

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We live in a time of exile—a time in which growing numbers of people find themselves living in the “foreign land” of a life that is removed from the home that they seek. The exile that I speak about is one that can be physical, as witnessed by the startling statistic that one million people were physically exiled from their homeland this past year along—many of them fleeing the violence that put themselves and their families in great danger. The Syrian refugee crisis, of course, is the most dramatic example of this 21<sup>st</sup> century reality.

Others, however, find themselves living in emotional or spiritual exile, cut-off or removed from themselves, the people that they love and the life that they long for. The “home” that they are looking for has nothing to do with physical structures or buildings, but instead, with the emotional and spiritual connections that are so essential in providing the sense of belonging, acceptance and love that is home.

Marcus Borg, the late New Testament and Jesus scholar, has suggested exile is one of the great “macro themes” of scripture, one that surfaces in several different contexts throughout both the Old and the New Testaments.

We, of course, see this theme most clearly outlined in the stories of Israel’s exile to Babylon beginning in the year 597 BCE. It was at that time that many of Jerusalem’s brightest and best were forced to relocate in Babylon, at the order of conquering King Nebuchadnezzar. Over the next fifty years, they were forced to live as “strangers in a strange land.” While they were not subject to great hardship or persecution in their new environment, it wasn’t home. The Psalmist would lament this condition by asking the plaintive question, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Many found it impossible to do so.

Embedded in much of Israel’s literature during this time of exile, is the unrelenting hope of the coming day when God would “prepare the way” for their return home to Jerusalem and their native land. We gain a good sense of this hope in many of the texts from the Book of Isaiah, texts that are traditionally used during the season of Epiphany.

Consider, for example, our first lesson this morning...

***“Lift up your eyes and look around; they shall all gather together, they shall come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.” (Isaiah 60: 4)***

Here we see the great hope of the coming day when Israel will return home from exile—a return to the land, the traditions, the customs and the relationships that have defined them as a people. To be sure, the home that they longed for was a physical place, but it was much

more than that. It was an emotional place, a relational place, a cultural place and yes, it was a spiritual place. Home was not just a place for those living in exile, but a feeling of belonging, of acceptance and inclusion.

Ironically, it was only when they were forcibly removed from their home that they gained a true appreciation for the value and importance of home.

John Ed Pearce has written, **“Home is a place you grow up wanting to leave, and grow old wanting to get back to.”** I think that he was absolutely correct. So often it is experience and age that teach us the true value of home.

In our lesson from Matthew’s Gospel this morning, we read of the account that is unique to Matthew among the Gospel writers—the account of Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing to Egypt to escape the persecution of King Herod. As you will recall, Herod, upon learning of the quest of the Magi, was intent upon killing any male child under two who might pose a threat to his rule. Heeding the advice of an angel who appeared to him in a dream, Joseph and his family left their home and fled to Egypt as refugees. They remained there until after the news of Herod’s death reached them.

It is not insignificant that Jesus began his life as a refugee, fleeing political oppression in his homeland. Later in his life as he became an itinerant preacher, he acknowledged that “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Jesus then, was quite familiar with the experience of exile and homelessness. It was something that he experienced personally.

Both of these scripture lessons serve to remind us, this morning, that the more things change, the more they stay the same. What was a tragic reality for the people of Israel in 597 BCE and for Jesus and his family in first century Israel, remains, for many in our world, a tragic reality in the year 2016. It has been estimated that, over this past year alone, over one million people have been displaced and forced to leave their homeland—oftentimes fleeing for their very lives.

We are, of course, familiar with the crisis that the Civil War in Syria has generated. We have seen the pictures. We have watched the news. We have witnessed the desperation of those who have crammed themselves and their families into life boats and railroad cars. And it seems so overwhelming, so impossible in the scope of its misery that we don’t even know what to think or how to react. We may even tell ourselves that there is nothing we can do about it...even if we know differently.

The refugee crisis, of course, is not limited to Syria alone. Grinding poverty, violence, and weather related devastation has forced millions of others to flee their homes various regions around the world—including Africa and Afghanistan—in their search for a safe and secure place to live.

This past year in Europe alone, over one million people, most of them from Syria, sought refuge from the brutal reality of war. Not since the aftermath of World War 11 have we witness such a mass movement of displaced people. And, as great as our current crisis is,

there is the potential for it to become even more serious and destabilizing than it already is. Already, the battle lines are being drawn in our own country as the political debate and the inevitable rhetoric heats up.

In the midst of it all, each one of us is faced with a fundamental choice—the choice of how we will respond to this crisis that will certainly play a critical role in our future and the future of our planet.

And quite frankly, I can't think of a more volatile issue to address in our current climate of fear that is rooted in recent acts of terrorism. I was actually tempted to change the topic for my message this morning because of the high emotion and controversy surrounding the matter of our response to the refugee crisis. But I decided not to do that because I believe that this is a topic that we must address if we seek to live out our faith in real world terms.

It would be easier, of course, to ignore it, to pretend that this crisis isn't happening and that there is absolutely nothing that we can do about it. But the truth of the matter is that it is happening and that there is, I believe, something we can do about it.

As we all know, there is a strong contingent of people who are afraid that if we admit refugees from certain Middle Eastern countries, we will be placing ourselves and our safety at risk. Some of these individuals have become quite vocal and passionate in making the case that we should close our borders to all those who fit a certain profile. While I understand this point of view and the fear that is driving it, I, personally, do not agree with it and here is why.

There is, I believe, another risk to consider here—the risk of failing to recognize that, in a fundamental way, we are our brother's and sister's keeper, and have a basic responsibility to care for those who, through no choice of their own, have had to flee their homes in search of a better life.

We are, after all, a nation originally comprised mostly of immigrants and refugees who came to this land with a similar hope. Nowhere is this hope more powerfully captured than in the poetry of Emma Lazarus inscribed on our Statue of Liberty:

*"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."*

If we chose to relinquish or revise this vision in order to placate our fear, I am afraid that we will lose something that is fundamental, indeed, something that is simply irreplaceable in giving shape to our identity as a people.

**More than that, however, I am afraid that we will lose something fundamental, something that is irreplaceable in giving shape to our identity as a people of faith.**

Running throughout the scripture narrative is the admonition to “welcome the stranger,” to include the outcast, and to free the captive. Jesus, of course, insisted that when we welcome the stranger, we, in effect, welcome him. These are not idle words, but words that are offered to remind us of our fundamental responsibility to care for others.

I realize that this is a very complex issue that resists simple solutions and quick fixes—and it is not my intent to try to offer that. It is merely my intent to provide a framework for approaching this matter from the perspective of our faith.

Is there a risk involved? Of course there is a risk involved. It would be foolish to suggest otherwise. But I believe that there is an even greater risk to ourselves and the values that we hold dear if we choose to be governed by our fear.

Faith, after all, invariably involves risk. Indeed, it is not really faith unless there is risk. As we reflect upon this tremendous crisis before us and the challenge that it poses to us and to our world, it is my hope that we will find that the risk of welcoming the stranger one that is worth the taking. Amen.