

# The Homecoming

Isaiah 40:1-11

November 29, 2009

(THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT)

Thursdays are sermon days (for me, anyway). But last Thursday was Thanksgiving, so I did it on Friday ... though when Friday came, I wished I had done it on Wednesday. Some preachers wait till Saturday night -- like cramming for finals, I suppose. But I can't do that. I need more time. I'm a slow thinker. It's like having a crock-pot mind in a microwave world. And crock-pots do a lot of sitting and staring, you know. No bells and buzzers. No sudden outbursts of energy. They just sit there for hours and keep *at* it until it's done. Which is what I did on Friday.

But when you sit on one end for so long, the other end wants to get up and walk around. And it does. Your mind just gets up and wanders around. And on Friday my mind wandered back to the voice of one singing in the living room. In December, mind you. And she was singing about a king and a shepherd and something like a homecoming, I think.

Doesn't sound very Christmassy does it? But *she*<sup>2</sup> thought it was. My grandmother sang the *Shepherd's Hymn*, she called it, because it said something to her about Advent and Christmas and the One who is coming. It says:

**The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never.  
I nothing lack if I am his,  
and he is mine forever...**

**Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,  
but yet in love he sought me;  
and on his shoulder gently laid,  
and home, rejoicing, brought me.**

Well, that's where my mind was off to on Friday. It wandered away to my grandmother's voice singing that hymn. And from there it wandered back home ... to the house we lived in by Ferguson Pond, where my mom and dad were putting lights on the tree. And Bing Crosby, and Andy Williams, and Tennessee Ernie Ford were singing songs about snow and mistletoe and *Parson Brown*, as I recall. And when all the ornaments

and tassels and little red apples were hung on the tree, my dad would reach way up high and put the Christmas star on the top of the tree. And then we'd turn out the lights, and light up the tree, and they would sing along with the voice from the stereo speaker.

And I thought about the Christmas parade with the high school marching band in their red uniforms, and the safety patrol, and the Brownies, and Cub Scouts, and the Future Farmers of America tagging along behind them. And there on the big red fire truck, with the firefighters and cheerleaders and Otis the Mayor, was Santa himself.

Oh, and from there -- did I mention my mind wanders a bit on sermon day -- from there it wandered round the corner and down the street to the Methodist church. And I remembered the day some of the Methodist Men went out to Mr. Queen's Christmas tree farm to pick out a tree for the church. And it was a beautiful thing, shaped just the way a Christmas tree *should* be shaped. So they cut it down, bundled it up, and hauled it back to the church. And when they got

there they lifted it out of the truck and carried it through the big double doors.

And when they did, they were shocked. It was still growing! It looked *twice* as big as it did at the farm! This thing was a monster. A giant. *Pine-zilla* it was! You've seen pictures of a tree just like this out in California, I'm sure -- the one out there with a tunnel -- for cars, mind you -- running right through the middle of it! A giant redwood right there in Wayne, West Virginia! Well ... *almost*. The thing was so big they had to trim off the lower branches just to get it through the door. And when they finally wrestled the beast down the center aisle to the front of the sanctuary, they "heaved and hoed" and stood it upright. Which was when they discovered that the tree was too tall. They knew this on account of the hole they had knocked in the ceiling. Jack Ross said, "Well ... who wants to go up on the roof and put the star on top?"

That was more than thirty years ago. The church is still there. And so is the hole. It's right there where they left it. "After all, it's a church," said Jack. "It's supposed to be holy (holey)."

That's why I used to wander over there so much when I was a kid -- during the "Wayne years," we call them, when we lived there in town. I'd go there sometimes after school and just sit and look at the tree with all of its Chrismons and the star at the top. And I'd look at the Advent wreath to see how many candles were left until Christmas Eve.

And it felt like a holy place, all silent and sacred. But it was a homey place, too. The kind of place, you know, where you feel at home. A place like that just becomes a part of you, I think. Like your mom's kitchen table, or your best friend's house, or that special place you go to sometimes just to be alone with God. It's wherever you are when you feel welcome and wanted. And the church was like that when I was a boy. So I'd go there sometimes and just sit for awhile.

Oh, and sometimes I'd sit there and look at my favorite picture -- a *giant* picture I thought it was in those days -- a stained glass window with a picture of that song -- the one that made my grandma think about Advent and Christmas. It was a giant picture of a shepherd. And "*on his shoulder gently laid*" was a little

lamb. And in his strong and gentle hand was a shepherd's staff.

I'd sit there sometimes... when I was down in the dumps and felt like I didn't have a friend in the world. And I'd look at that little lamb and wish that someone would gather me up in their arms (in a way) and carry me home.

Have you ever had that kind of feeling? A lot of folks in Judah did. They were down in the dumps and hurting and lonely. But more than anything else, they were homesick. Really. They were homesick for a time and a place they couldn't get back to. Because the *terrorists* had destroyed it. They had burned the land and wrecked their cities and shattered their houses, their hearts and their homes. And when it was over ... nothing was left of it. Not even God's house, the temple, the home-place of their hearts. And then they were gone. Driven out of their homeland and into some strange, God-forsaken place, they called it.

And the people who did this to them said, “Sing us<sup>7</sup>  
a song! Play us a tune! One of those little ditties you  
used to sing at the temple!” Can you imagine?

Later on, they sang about *that*. Remember the  
song? Psalm 137?

**By the rivers of Babylon --  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
[But] How could we sing the Lord’s song  
in a strange land?**

Oh, they were broken inside and hurting and  
hopeless. They were alone and abandoned --  
abandoned by God, whom *they* had abandoned, they  
thought, by the way they had lived. All wrapped up in  
themselves, as if no one else mattered. Orphans they  
were. Like little children with no place to call home.

Ah, but then they heard a voice -- the voice of a<sup>8</sup>  
man called Isaiah. And in that dark sort of wilderness,  
that voice cried out and said, **“Get everything ready!  
Prepare the way! Every valley will be lifted up and  
every mountain and hill brought low. The uneven  
ground will be leveled out. And the rough places will  
be made smooth. And the glory of the Lord will be  
seen,”** said Isaiah. **“God gives you his word.”**

The message was loud and clear: “Prepare the way!  
Get everything ready! For the Lord your God isn’t  
*about* to let *anything* stand in his way. But he will  
come. And **He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He  
will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in  
his bosom (it means *close to his heart*), and gently lead  
those that are with young.”** That’s what Isaiah said to  
the people of Judah. He said what the hymn says -- the  
Shepherd’s Hymn -- the one my grandmother sang...

**Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,  
but yet in love he sought me;  
and on his shoulder gently laid,  
and home, rejoicing, brought me.**

And for those who were hurting and broken and so far from home, that was good news -- glad tidings of great joy! L

But what about you? Do you know anyone who is hurting inside, or broken, or bruised in heart and spirit? Do you know anyone who's empty inside? Or homesick for love and acceptance? Or maybe just to know and feel that they're not alone?

It happens, you know, around this time of year. Because the holiday season is like a *magnifying glass*. It makes everything bigger. Which is good, in a way. Because those who care and love and give so much, reach out even more, I think, at this time of year. [They give in the Spirit of Saint Nicholas. Remember Saint Nicholas? He was born back in the third century -- sometime around the year 280. And we remember him still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because he cared so much for the children, and he fed the hungry, and gave the gift of love and joy to everyone around him.] And Christmas can do that. It can make our hearts bigger....

But it can make the hurts bigger, too....

My father spent most of his childhood in a Masonic home (an orphanage) in Louisville, Kentucky. Which was hard enough, I'm sure -- being a stranger in a strange land. But at this time of year it was even harder. Because he was homesick for love and acceptance. And every Christmas he had this secret hope in his heart that some kind, warm-hearted, loving family would come and gather him up in their arms and take him away to someplace he could call home ....

The holidays do that. And not just to little ones who've been abused and abandoned, but to people you know -- someone you work with, or live with, or go to school with. Someone who seems to have everything going for them. Oh, and sometimes it happens to people like you and me. Something inside you just feels *out of place* somehow. A homesick kind of feeling it is. A feeling that somehow your heart's true home is far away. And you can't for the *life* of you find your way there....

But if you'll be very still and listen deep down in your heart, you'll hear that same voice that spoke to Isaiah the prophet. And that voice will say, "Take

heart, take comfort. God sees and God hears. God knows where you are. And he won't let anything stand between you and his love. But he will come to you...

**He will feed his flock like a shepherd,  
He will gather the lambs in his arms,  
He will carry them close to his heart,  
and gently lead those that are with young.**

You've heard it before ... **There's no place God would rather be than with you. And when God longs for home, he is longing and yearning to be at home in your heart. And that's good news -- the glad tidings of great joy that shall be to all people. All people, mind you ... including you.** L

So, as I was saying, my mind wandered a good bit on Friday -- back home to Wayne and the house we lived in beside the pond. And finally it wandered back to that same stained-glass window with the picture of Jesus the Shepherd. Sometimes, when I was down in the dumps or feeling all alone, I'd just kind of sit there and look at that stained-glass picture. At Jesus the Shepherd, with his staff in his hand. And there "on his

shoulder gently laid" was the lamb. And the lamb looked so safe, and warm, and *at home* there that I wandered what it would be like if I could be that little lamb. And one day I found out ... in the most amazing way.

It was when I was five (or maybe six, I suppose) on a dark and dreary sort of day, when the leaves were brown and the sky was gray. And I was sitting alone at my grandma's kitchen table playing with a rabbit. Not a real *live* rabbit, mind you, but a little china rabbit that always sat in the corner by the table. It was a gift. And I had the feeling it came from somebody she really cared for -- someone close to her heart. Because she told me more than once that the little brown rabbit was very special to her.

And sometimes, when I stayed over at her house, she would take it down from the shelf. And she'd put it on the table. And she'd bring two small glasses of milk and two lemon cookies, and we'd have our treat, she called it. And as we did, she would tell me a story about a little brown rabbit that hopped through the forest. Or she'd tell me the story of the hare and the

tortoise, or Peter Cottontail, or some other story<sup>13</sup>  
about a rabbit.

And that was one of my favorite things when I was a boy -- to sit with my grandma and hold the rabbit and hear her tell one of her stories. And every now and then, she'd let me sit and play with it there at the table ... if I promised to be very careful.

But one day -- a dark and dreary sort of day -- the rabbit hopped (with the help of my hand) a little too close to the edge. And it fell from the table. And when it hit the big braided rug under the table, it broke. And something inside of me felt broken, too.

And I ran. I ran and I hid behind the old barn past the far end of the garden. And I sat down in the dirt and cried. I cried and cried. Because it wasn't just the rabbit I'd broken, it was everything. Everything, mind you. Because that was my grandmother's rabbit. And it was something she treasured and loved. And I broke it. And I *knew* she'd be mad. So mad she'd never want to see me again. Or let me sit at her table or stay at her

house. And she would never tell me another story, as long as I lived.<sup>14</sup>

So I sat there crushed and broken -- like someone who wanted so much to go home, but would never be welcome or wanted there again. And I thought, "This is where I belong, down in the dirt... and all alone."

And I remember thinking, "No one will ever find me here." But after a while, I heard something. It sounded like footsteps coming around the side of the barn. And I knew who it was. It was her. It was my grandma. She was coming to scold me. So I braced myself, because she was about to tell me that I was bad, and that she was ashamed, and that she never wanted to see me again.

And she came and she stood there. But she didn't say anything. She just knelt down beside me, gathered me up in her arms, and carried me home. And she sat me down in a chair at the kitchen table. And there was that rabbit... all in one piece. And she put her arms around me and said, "You know, if I had to I could probably get along without that rabbit.... But I don't

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think I could ever do without you.” And that day she let me have two lemon cookies and a big glass full of milk. And then she told me a story about a little brown rabbit that was broken in two and put back together with a whole lot of love and a wee bit of glue.

Isn't that what Isaiah said to the people of Judah when their hearts were broken? And isn't that what God says to you and to me and to all who are homesick for his love and his peace? Ah, the message God speaks to you in Advent is this: **There is Someone who wants to bring you home -- Someone who can't bear the thought of being apart from you. And he loves you so much that he won't let anything stand between you and his heart.**

For as it says in Isaiah:

**Every valley shall be lifted up  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together...**

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For the Lord your God will come. And...

**He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs with his arms,  
and carry them close to his heart,  
and gently lead those that are with young.**

God sees, God hears, God knows where you are wherever you may be in your life, in your faith, or in your relationships ... and he will come to you there and bring you home.

But don't take my word for it ... Take his.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

*Benen, ObLSB*



