

Returning Home, Home

Isaiah 11: 1-10

- A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- ² The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
- ³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
- He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
- ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
- ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
- ¹⁰ On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

If you have ever been at the airport when a soldier comes home after a tour, it is an emotional scene. The family waits at the exit in anticipation. As a camouflaged image gets closer, one of the children yells, "Daddy!" The soldier drops the duffle bag, falls to his knees as the children are scooped up into his arms. For a moment nothing else in the world matters. He's safe. He's secure. He's home. Those who witness the moment can't help but be touched by the homecoming as they clap or tear up. Why? Because for a moment, just a moment, it is as if the world is put back together as it should be. It's an image of returning home, home.

Start by considering what it feels like to return home. Maybe the feeling carries us back to a memory. Perhaps we remember when we would come home from school and we could smell our favorite meal warming on the stove. Home. Maybe it was after a stay in the hospital. Nurses coming in every two hours to check vitals, beeping machines. But when we get home we get to sleep in our own bed, and there is nothing like sleeping in our own bed! Home. A couple months ago I went back home for a friend's funeral. It was the first time in more than a decade. Notice I still call it home. It was where I grew up. My body naturally knew which roads to take. I knew the shortcuts my GPS doesn't know. Drove past the old house, the old hot dog stand I'd ride my bike to twice a week, the little park where I had my first smooch. Reuniting with old friends where it was as if no time had lapsed whatsoever. Home. Remember what it feels like to return home? Maybe you have a memory.

Of course, here's the tension: home changes. Life changes. The job calls us to a foreign place. Family moves away or we retire to the south. A beloved pet passes, or a loved one dies and home is instantly different. And there is this transition period of disorientation where we have to figure out what home is all over again. When Joy's Grandpap began showing signs of dementia, he sold his home of fifty years and moved into an assisted living center. He would always talk about how in the middle of the night he would get out of bed and find himself half asleep walking into his closet. At first, we thought it was a story concerning his dementia, but what we came to realize is that in his home of fifty years—in his home, home—the closet of the new place is where the bathroom used to be. He walked into the closet every night because he was used to walking into the bathroom. The change is disorienting. Home changes because we change. Our life-situations change and the world changes around us. After the 2016 election remember how many people said, "We're moving to Canada!" Because home changed and we are left to figure out what and where home is.

The Hebrews had a word to describe what home felt like. You've probably heard the word before. It is the word *Shalom*. We would translate the word as "peace," but what it really means is "wholeness." *Shalom* means to be wholly connected to God, each other, creation, and even ourselves in a way that brings a sense of being home, home. If we look at our bibles, we see an overarching pattern of God's people being at home for a while, but then ending up in exile—away from home. The rhythm goes back and forth from the beginning to the end. God's first people at home in the garden of Eden. Then they lose connection with God and each other and ultimately are sent away from the garden, away from home. Then Abraham returns to the land, only to have his great-grandson, Joseph, sold into exile by his brothers. Then Moses picks up the baton as the Israelites wander the wilderness from Egypt to return home, home. Except, when they get there, they build an empire of their own—touting overt nationalism and forgetting their calling as a blessing for all nations. Now the prophets are sounding the alarm that the people will head into exile once again and they will be away from home. It's the pattern of God's people. Home and exile. Having *shalom*, being fully connected to God and each other, and then losing the sense of wholeness, of home. It happens over and over and over again.

Except, God doesn't give up on us. When it seems as if all is lost God gives us a vision of the world as it should be? A sprig growing out of a stump. A day when a leader shares God's heart,

bearing wisdom and compassion, seeking justice and peace rather than wealth and power. A vision of *shalom* where wolves lie down with lambs and all of creation is home, home together.

But we know we aren't quite there yet, are we? There is a disconnect between the world as it is and the world as it should be. So, what do we do in the meantime?

Have you heard of Tara the elephant and Bella the mutt? They are an unusual pairing: a three-ton elephant being escorted around by a fifty-pound dog. You can see them playing together, the elephant's trunk rubbing the dog's belly. The dog running and playing between the gigantic legs of the elephant. One day Bella got injured and needed three weeks to recuperate in the sanctuary office. Wouldn't you know, every single day Tara would return, again and again, to the gate of the office building waiting, holding vigil in anticipation until Bella came home.

Perhaps during advent that is what we do. We seek justice and wisdom, and we return again and again holding vigil in anticipation until what is broken in our world is made whole again; until all of creation has returned home...just as it should be. Amen.