

Maybe you can help me out here. Shout out the answers:

_____, sweet _____.
_____ is where the _____ is
I'll be _____ for Christmas
_____ alone.

What do these all have in common? Well, for one, the word, “Home”. Another is some kind of nostalgia that we sometimes get when listening to Christmas songs – Bing Crosby, Burl Ives, John Denver and the Muppets – you know that elusive feeling. I subscribe to a “word of the day” site on facebook. On Tuesday, the word was Hireath. Hireath is Welsh for : “A spiritual longing for a home which maybe never was. Nostalgia for ancient places to which we cannot return. It is the echo of the lost places of our soul’s past and our grief for them.” (Victoria Erickson, Writer facebook page)

What does home mean for you?

For me, growing up, home was safe. Mom was usually there – unless she was sleeping after working nights as an RN at the Mennonite home. Dad was outside in the orchard, unless he was at work at Crysler's on the assembly line. Snuffy or Bennie or Pilar – those were our house-dogs – were there to greet us. Usually by the time we'd get home from school, Mom would have supper started – baking lasagna with garlic toast was my favourite. We'd sit down to eat supper and listen to CBC – we'd talk some before 6, but if 6:00 came around while we were eating, we'd have to be quiet so as to listen to the news.

During advent, every year, we'd put up the tree and decorate the living room – blowing the tinsel onto the tree. For Christmas day we'd plan for a unique dining experience - usually involving exotic food – like spaghetti, or tacos, or fillet mignon...or stew – but always in the living room with all the lights out except the tree, and some candles.

There was something special about going home for Christmas...but going home for Christmas stopped 8 years ago when my dad died – and had been hard for the 10 years before that because of my mom's death. And without her, it seemed as though we didn't really get along all that great...and yet, we still love each other.

There are times that I yearn to go back to the way things were - but I know I never can, because that way and those people don't exist anymore. Yet still – there remains that nostalgic longing.

Things have changed since I've been married and have had children. We are the home that our children come to. We make traditions together now. And one of our traditions is to have my sister join us for Christmas which she – thankfully – will this year. For her, its not coming home – but it is coming to a place where she is known and loved.

Parts of us are always looking for a way to return home and get back to those days. I hear that from you too – when I hear statements that begin with, “Don't you remember when...we had a full Sunday School” or “I wish we still had a choir...those days were so good...”

We yearn for that special relationship...that familiarity ...that care-free time when things seemed so simple and so perfect (at least when we think of them now, we can ignore all the hard times).

More of us than not experience some kind of heartache during this time of year, and even more of us try to cover it up. But the truth is that we're all a little home-sick for a home that seems so out of reach.

This Advent season we've been talking about restoration. About how Christ is coming – Immanuel – God with us in the flesh and will restore us – all of us to the way that God desires for us to be – whole and complete. We hear about restoration – about how Christ is coming – Immanuel – God with us – to restore the kingdom of God here among us – the church and the world.

We long for peace – we long for hope – and we long for that feeling of belonging. We heard last week of John calling out from the wilderness “Repent! Come to wholeness! Come to God’s shalom!” Today we talk about God’s wondrous work of transforming that which is broken into something that is restored – from disharmony to reconciliation – from hate – to love, from lost – to home.

Long long ago the prophets prophesied for the LORD – social justice...care for the widow and orphan, alien and poor. But those in power did not listen and made some bad political decisions and Babylon came and captured Judah, destroyed the temple and took away the rich and powerful into exile – leaving the poor, widowed, orphans to fend for themselves in a destroyed and desolate land.

This time of "exile" away from home was God’s judgment upon those who took "home" for granted. As Isaiah pointed out, God was and is the real power behind every throne and God will not be taken for granted.

Eventually Persia came along and defeated Babylon and inherited all the exiles ... Ezekiel, Daniel – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ... Esther, Mordecai ... their stories all take place at this time.

In the back closets and the dark houses, God’s people met. They were disheartened. Being away from home was tough. For 70 years they mourned. New generations were born and these too grieved that which they never had had.

We are witness to their cry in Psalm 137 when we read: "*By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.*

On the willows there we hung up 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!'

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither !

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." (137:1-6)

Isaiah was a prophet who shared a dream with those forced from home, a dream of home...and a God who has never and would never abandon God’s people. To a lost and grieving people, he preached through the prophet, Isaiah:

Isaiah 35:1 - 10:

35 Wilderness and desert will sing joyously,
the badlands will celebrate and flower—

Like the crocus in spring,
bursting into blossom,
a symphony of song and color.

Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift.
Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts.
God’s resplendent glory, fully on display.
God awesome, God majestic.

Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees.

Tell fearful souls,
“Courage! Take heart!
God is here, right here,
on his way to put things right
And redress all wrongs.
He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”

Blind eyes will be opened,
deaf ears unstopped,
Lame men and women will leap like deer,
the voiceless break into song.
Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness,
streams flow in the desert.
Hot sands will become a cool oasis,
thirsty ground a splashing fountain.
Even lowly jackals will have water to drink,
and barren grasslands flourish richly.

There will be a highway called the Holy Road.
No unrepentant are permitted on this road.
It’s for God’s people exclusively—
impossible to get lost on this road.

Not even fools can get lost on it.
No lions on this road,
no dangerous wild animals—
Nothing and no one dangerous or threatening.
Only the redeemed will walk on it.

The people God has ransomed will return on this road.
They’ll sing as they make their way home to Zion,
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.

Between Babylon and Jerusalem, across a barren and harsh wilderness, God will make a straight and clear road – paved, the prophet said. Straight through the wilderness back to home.

God will make that road straight – no one – not even fools can get lost when they're on the road. Along the way, the desert will blossom, and this path will be made safe.

See! God promises restoration! The road passes through some rough terrain – but even the wilderness will be transformed from barren and desert and wild and fierce to thriving lush easy land. Magnificent like the snow-covered mountains and aromatic cedar forests of Lebanon. Lush and verdant like the foliage growing on the side of the outcrop, Mount Carmel. Fertile like the fields and flowers of the coastal plain of Sharon. No sage-grass, tumbleweed, rattlers, coyotes, or scorpions here - not even lions. But springs – water in dry places – refreshing water for thirsty mouths and hearts.

Isaiah continues: Those who can't see it as a possibility - their eyes will be opened. Those who have heard so much bad news that they are deaf to good news when it comes - their ears will be opened. Those who don't think their legs can make it home - they will end up leaping there. And those who feel they have nothing to say of any worth to anyone - these folks won't be able to quiet down the song erupting from their heart.

This was and is a marvelous vision, a great promise for those who long to go home. It even has something good to say to those who are so dense that they can't grasp an opportunity when it hits them over the head. On this highway in the wilderness, on this "Holy Way," Isaiah says, "no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." Good grief, there's hope for all God's people who are a bit slow to catch on, folks like me ... and you?

This vision culminates in that wonderful promise that the redeemed and ransomed of God will return on the road. God will pay whatever price is necessary to bring his people home. A "redeemer" is a family member who steps forward to purchase the freedom of a person who had been sold into slavery. A "redeemer" is someone who buys back land that had to be sold away to pay the debt, so that it is not cut off from the family. The "redeemed" are those for whom the price, the "ransom," has been paid for their freedom to return home.

"The redeemed," Isaiah envisioned, *"shall walk" from Babylon back home to Zion. "The people God has ransomed will return on this road. They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion, unfading halos of joy encircling their heads, Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night."* (Isaiah 35:9b-10)

And who will not be on the road home from captivity?

The unrepentant. Those who choose not to step on that road to freedom. Those who choose to stay. Those who have left the laws and the prophets God sent and have chosen to align themselves with their captors – Those will not be on the road home from captivity.

Who else will not be on the road? No lions. No wild animals and no one who is dangerous or threatening. It will be a road for rejoicing and leaping and singing...and plodding, and excitement and just walking home while kicking a stone.

And what a wonderful day that was – when the exiled were free. What a wonderful journey that was – when they left their captors and made their way to their land and their people. And what a wonderful day that was when at last they saw the hill of Zion.

I want to pause here for a moment and just make a shore remark about what God is doing here – more specifically what we see in this “journey” motif. Always in the Hebrew Bible when we read of a people or person or tribe going from ONE place to another – like the 40 years in the wilderness, or Joseph captured and sent to Egypt, or even here the journey to exile and now the return. When we read these, keep in mind that God is doing something in the journey through the wilderness. Like “home” can be metaphorical – so can “journey”.

People on a journey go from one place to another. From one way of being to another – from freedom to slavery – from bondage to freedom – from life to death – and death to new life. And in the Bible – it’s always a time travelled through the wilderness.

Journey is a motif for becoming. A pattern. We see it throughout the Old Testament, and we see it here too. The people have suffered long in slavery and now are on the way to freedom through a wilderness made safe by God’s holy road.

And there. There they see the hill of Zion – and it’s in ruins. And the city in ruins. And wait – are those idols? Who ARE these people? Um, where is the food we’re used to?

And isn’t that the way it is. These days, when we finally get home for Christmas after a long and cranky car ride, or plane ride we find out that we have to share a room with Aunt Harriet who snores really loudly. Or we discover that Grandma doesn’t actually enjoy cooking turkey and so for Christmas supper she’s making lutefisk and boiled cabbage. That’s just the little stuff. What about the painful relationships where things have grown too cold that no amount of hot air will thaw the friendship. Frostbite has set in. The damage has been done. Or there is no home to return to. Or what we thought we had is lost forever and we see no hope.

And, here’s something that the Hebrew people had to learn – and we do too. Home is not just where we grew up, you know. We who try to go back to home "as it used to be," are almost always disappointed.

The exiles who finally made it back to Jerusalem after many years "by the waters of Babylon," found things very different when they returned. When they tried to recreate what once was, they found resistance.

The biggest roadblock was actually God. God who desired this people to move forward, not backward. After-all, the "good old days" were not exactly the "good old days" in God’s eyes. There WAS a reason for their capture and exile, after all.

God looks ahead, doesn’t stay stuck in the past but sees what can yet be. Returning the people to home is a step forward, not backward. The people had to learn *again* what it was that God desired for them.

They were still on the road – except this was not an easy road now – but one still where – if they were open – God would lead them to restoration.

Not being made the same as they were – but being restored to something bigger and more.

In a sense, that’s what this season of Advent is all about. We’re not just looking back to the first coming of Christ into this world. We’re looking ahead to the future, and we’re on that road already.

We're to have our eyes open, our ears unstopped, our weak legs strengthened, our voices tuned to praise. And we won't get there unless we start on this road. We may be fools at times, but thankfully even fools will not go astray, as long as our hearts are set upon our true home – and our eyes and hearts open to see what kind of restoration God has in store for us.

I wonder what God's going to be doing in our lives in years to come? Stop focusing on the poor choices that line the streets of our current way home. Instead, dream on with Isaiah. Open your eyes to see these wonderful things that are being restored. There's a shoot coming out of that stump of Jesse. Look there – a wolf is in a puppy pile with the sheep. There! A flower is blooming in the dry barren wild wilderness!

God is my redeemer as well. I too – and you too – are ransomed of the LORD. Our neighbours who love the LORD are redeemed – all our churches in Ritzville, Lind and Moses Lake are on that road with us. Our brothers and sisters in Palestine, Russia, Ukraine, China, Israel, South Africa, you name it – We're all of us are on this road... even those of us who may be wondering how to sing the Lord's song in the strange land.

All of us, even those who may be sitting and weeping, having hung up our harps. All of us, even those who may feel withered, without a future - or at least a future we can imagine. All of us together are shown the road and are invited home to see what good things can be restored.

"And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Amen!