

Coming Home  
Psalm 84  
Oct. 4, 2009

Introduction:

Home. Four little letters in one little English word, and yet a veritable waterfall of meaning cascades over us as we try to tell what the word has meant—and means to us still.

\*Some folks, after the attitude of Robert Frost, sardonically declare that home is “the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.” For many, it is that comfortable feeling you get when you park your car in the driveway at the end of a long journey. Home.

\*For some, it can be the way the front of the house looks, framed by the sway of trees in agreeable response to a soft, early autumn breeze. Or, when that breeze whips up into a gale and the darkened sky seems to come unglued, home can be that welcoming gape of a garage door opening up to dry protective safety. Home.

\*For returning college students, it can be the sight of the clock tower, or the sky-scraping rim of the football stadium, or the stretch of grass that swoops up to a dormitory. Home.

\*For an avid reader, it can be the feel of a brand new book just released by a favorite author, read in the enfolding comfort of that familiar easy chair. Home.

\*For a three year old child, it can be the touch of mother, the scruffy cheek of father, the smell of breakfast on Saturday mornings. Home.

\*For an athlete, it is that familiar locker-room after being on the road for all those away-games. Home.

B. We all know we don't really appreciate home until we've been away from it. We take for granted that sense of well-being, that sense of being in *just* the right place—that is until we've been in the wrong place for a while.

Like for the person who has spent a week in a hospital bed, sleep interrupted all night long—yearning for his or her own bed—yearning for home...

Or the soldier who wakes up every morning to the endless beige landscape of the middle east, smelling sand, tasting sand—yearning for the green of summer trees or the flash of autumn color and the smell of American soil—yearning for home.

II. The story of our faith is a homecoming story. It tells of the yearnings we have for God's dwelling place, our spiritual home.

\*Our faith story begins with a leave-taking from the garden home that provided for all human wants and needs. It tells of wilderness wandering, searching for a home—and of finding home in a land flowing with milk and honey.

\*It contains real-life, rough-edged homecoming stories—like the one about the two brothers who fought each other over the family inheritance. How many times in our own families do we feel the pain of family division over issues that, at the time, seem so darn important to us? And once harsh words are said and threats are made, how easy it is to walk away from the home we once knew!

And yet, how impoverished we all are when that happens—when the heart-essence of home is torn apart. How God's heart breaks when homes are broken!

And so God goes to work, pushing us back together again, giving us visions of reconciliation—like we hear of in the story of Jacob and Esau. The scripture from Genesis 33 tells us that after being parted for many years, Jacob decided it was time to go home. He was fearful of the greeting he might receive from the brother he had done wrong. As he neared the land from which he had been parted for so long, he looked up and saw Esau coming toward him. Jacob moved in front of his very large household entourage, and got on his knees. He bowed seven times as Esau rushed toward him—a sign of humility that did more than just merely saying "I'm sorry."

What happened? Did Esau rage and say—get off my land, traitor brother!? Did Esau freeze Jacob out with cold, indifferent silence? The Bible tells us that

"....Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him—and they wept." (Gen. 33:4)

## Home-coming

\*Our faith story also tells us of a people separated from their home by war—taken away to a foreign city with foreign customs. How bereft they felt! The psalmist sang their heart's laments "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" when we remembered home.

And what joy was had when they were finally free to go home—a joy that was delayed in its celebration until after a restoration project in which they rebuilt God's home and their homes. But on that restoration day, they celebrated "the dedication with gladness, with thanksgiving and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres....They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off." (Nehemiah 12:27, 43)

## Home-coming

\*And, of course, there is also that little homecoming story that Jesus told—the parable of the prodigal—the rebellious son who ran away from home—whose homelessness became not only figurative, but literal, winding up amongst the pigs eating their slop.

How many of us have been there, done that? Followed the "wild hare," running away from everything that home represents, to do our own thing—wild thang—and found ourselves at a loss, adrift, alone, unhappy, miserable, hungry, thirsty, sick and tired?

Jesus said that when the prodigal in his story had hit bottom, there was no where to go BUT home. Still, there is such fear in us when we turn back around and head toward home—(The theological word for that—and Jesus' word, too—is repentance). What kind of reception will we get? Will we be rejected? Fussed at? Scorned? Abused?

Jesus' beautiful story of coming home, an allegory for our returning to the realm of God, gives us a vision of homecoming that is scented with the divine fragrance of love, with a parent's arms opened wide in welcome—a banquet feast prepared for the celebration. (Luke 15).

Home-coming!

III. For Christians, worship each week is a foretaste of that family reunion—with arms of welcome opened wide, and a table set for us. Not just some of us, but all of us. Homecoming

\*For Christians, especially on this occasion when we observe World Communion Sunday, we rejoice together that God's home is big enough for all of us. "In my Father's house there are many rooms," Jesus said. "If it were not true, would I have told you that I got to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14: 1) The realm of God is big enough for all of us with room to spare!

And so it is good that we come home each week, where we are welcomed and fed by God's grace.

IV. And it is especially good that we have all come to worship at East Dallas Christian Church this week—a place that has offered God's homecoming welcome to so many over the 106 years of ministry that has taken place here.

\*We can't help but remember those saints of the church who first laid the bricks and mortar for our church home, and those who subsequently kept the doors open wide for the comings and goings of the tens of thousands of people this church has nurtured over the years.

\*We can't help but remember those who were called as minister to God's people here, and those who were called into God's ministry here.

\*We can't help but remember our family stories—some which makes us cry with the hurt that was done to one another; some which make us laugh with the antics of quirky Christian cousins.

V. East Dallas Christian Church has been a home to so many in the past, and still is home to most of us here today.

-Now, I know some people in recent years have been concerned that the doors to our home might close for good—that we would dwindle down to the point that there would be no place to which to come home.

Well, I'm here to tell you today, the doors of East Dallas Christian Church are still open, and they're going to be open for a good while longer.

\*\*Because the need in our world is great. There are so many people who are spiritually homeless. There are so many people who are literally homeless. There's too much ministry to be done yet for us to close the doors and walk away.

\*\*Besides, we have a baby boom going on in the congregation at present. The cradle roll is growing. These babies need a community of faith to shelter them with God's love as they grow, and in their dedication we as a congregation made a pledge that we would be here for them.

\*\*And we have 22 new members to date this year who have found a home here, who have pitched their tents within this temple of God's—and there are more yet to come.

\*\*In addition, we have an outreach and mission program like no other church I know—where we offer some of the best sacred and classical music anywhere in the country; where we meet the needs of those most vulnerable in our city with our 5-story building Community Center; where we help teach new residents of our great nation to speak the language they'll need to survive and thrive.

That vision for mission is in the DNA of this church—and has seeped into the life-choices of so many of our members that it can't be contained by these four

walls—from Allan and Joan Eubank and their continued work in Thailand to Patricia Maples and her work in Ghana; to Ron Somers-Clark and his work in Honduras; to Brandon Alexander and his work in Asia; to Christine Byrkit and her work with the Yakima community; to Cletus and Mariah Glasener and their work to Tanzania; to our CYF group and their work in Oklahoma.

They go out to help others find their home in Christ. They go out to help others build new lives because of Christ.

And as these and other people go out from here in mission in the future, they'll need a place to come home to—and we'll be right here.

VI. Some of you may remember my telling you about George, who was one of the snowbirds who migrated to Tucson from Vermont each winter. The unusual thing about George was that he was also homeless.

There were many reasons why George was homeless—most of them which I would call unfortunate. George and I would have many a conversation about the choices that kept him from living life to its fullest. Still, when George was sober, he had one of the clearest understandings of what making “home” in the broadest sense meant.

George would travel with just his tent and a back pack in which was placed all his worldly goods. He would set up “home” in the desert—underneath the open skies, a little cook stove to heat whatever food he had. When he needed money, he worked day labor. He never was hungry, nor did he ever ask the church for financial help.

When I asked him why he didn't stay in a shelter, George would say joyously, “The earth is the Lord's—and if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.” Where ever he was, George pitched his tent and made a home anywhere—because the earth was God's and all that dwelt therein.

And, wherever he was, George also always found a church home to attend. He told me stories of congregations who opened their doors and hearts to him all over the country. He would worship with them, becoming part and parcel of

their church family. Wherever he went, he always knew he could always come “home” because there would be a church to welcome him in.

You know, Jesus did the same thing—his mission was to the world—and he went out into the world to share God’s Good news. But he always came home—to God’s home—the temple. That’s why it was so disturbing to him when he came home and saw it being defiled by moneychangers and thievery.

For Christ, the temple was God’s dwelling place where he could rest and find room for praise. For us, the church is God’s dwelling place where we can rest and find room for praise. It is within these walls that we learn that home-coming is more than just a single day in a single place. It is the eternal invitation to all of us—offered to us by our God who loves us so.

And so we lift up our voices with the psalmist!

How lovely is thy dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord;  
My heart and flesh sig for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,  
And the swallow a nest where she may lay her young  
At they altars, O Lord of hosts,  
My King and my God.

Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise. Amen.  
It’s good to be home.

(Thanks to my friend and colleague, Dr. Robert Hill, for crafting the introduction for me in his usual poetic way!)