

The Third Sunday in Advent
December 11-12, 2010
Isaiah 35:1-10

“Home for the Holidays”

As we move toward Christmas, there is a longing on the part of many of us to be home for the holidays. Very soon, college students will be returning home for that long winter break, and lots of people will be traveling near and far to join loved ones for Christmas – to be home for the holidays. This season draws our hearts and minds back to what is most essential in life; namely, relationships and family, and that is often symbolized by home. Somewhere in the course of life we make the transition from home being our parents’ home where we grew up to home being our own place with all the customs and traditions that we’ve accumulated over the years. Music of the season speaks to this longing for home: “There’s no place like home for the holidays, cause no matter how far away you roam, if you want to be happy in a million ways, for the holidays you can’t beat home sweet home.” And Bing Crosby’s song that captured the feelings of our nation in World War II: “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.” Today’s message, based on the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 35, is entitled, “Home for the Holidays.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

Let’s be honest with ourselves: home for the holidays can be romanticized. For many, home is not always remembered with fondness, but as a place of tension and conflict, even abuse. And yet, there is something within us that longs for that warmth of belonging that is – or should be – home. In today’s Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 35:1-10), the prophet Isaiah speaks of coming home to the exiled people of Judah and Jerusalem now living in far-off Babylon. Their city and temple had been destroyed by the invading Babylonian army, people dispersed and relocated outside their homeland, and only the poorest of the poor left behind. In the midst of their shattered world, God speaks a word of hope and encouragement to his people about coming home.

It is historical fact that the desert country between Babylon and Palestine was not altered in the least when God’s people went through it in returning home from exile. The beautiful picture painted by Isaiah did not meet with reality. It is also historical fact that the earthly land through which God’s children pass through today on our way to our heavenly home is in no way turned into a beautiful garden for us. It is the same rough, barren and sin-filled country it ever was. God does not beautify the world through which his people pass as we travel heavenward. If the Lord did do this, we might prefer to settle down permanently right here, and not press on to our heavenly home. The writer to the Hebrews has it right: **“For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come”** (Hebrews 13:14).

So, if Isaiah’s vision was not fulfilled when the exiled people of Jerusalem returned home, when was it – or when will it – be fulfilled? Today’s Gospel lesson points us to Jesus. Even his cousin, John the Baptist, wasn’t sure about who Jesus really was: **“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”** (Matt. 11:3). John’s question is really our own question: Jesus, are you the one? Though we may not be in a physical prison like John, there are all sorts of other prisons that keep us locked up. We serve time in the prison of fear, anxiety, and worry; the prison of disease, pain, and addiction; the prison of anger, resentment, and bitterness that shackles us; the prison of hopelessness that sees no way out. And

in our prisons, we cry out: Jesus, are you the one? Are you the one who can set us free? Jesus' response is not just for John then, but for us now: **“Go and tell John [and Joe, and Bill, and Sally, and Betty] what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me”** (Matt. 11:4-6). Jesus' earthly life and ministry are the fulfillment of what Isaiah saw some 750 years before Jesus was ever born: **“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy”** (Isaiah 35:5-6).

Today's Epistle reading uses the words “patient” or “patience” four times in those four short verses (James 5:7-10). This is important, because most of us are not patient people. We don't like to wait; we become frustrated with delays. And yet patient waiting is exactly what Scripture calls us to do: patient waiting for the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy; patient waiting for the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus; patient waiting for Jesus' return at his final advent. In his first advent, Jesus gave us a foretaste of what is to come when he opened the eyes of the blind, made the lame to walk, healed the lepers, caused the deaf to hear, raised the dead, and brought good news of forgiveness, life and salvation to the world. Through his life of active obedience to the Father's will, through his suffering and death upon the cross, through his glorious resurrection from the dead, Jesus is the one. He's the one we've been waiting for! For now, we're called to wait with patience a little bit more until Jesus' final advent. And when that happens, when by God's amazing grace we finally come to that place which the Lord has prepared for us from the foundation of the world (John 14:1-4; Matthew 25:34), creation itself will be renewed according to Isaiah's vision: the desert will rejoice and blossom, the burning sand will become a pool, and dangerous creatures will be transformed. And God's redeemed people will be fully restored in God's own image, enjoying face-to-face in in blessed reality fellowship with the Lord who created and recreated us, and we are home at last.

While we wait, we're called to help each other along the journey of faith through this life: We're called to **“strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you”** (Isaiah 35:3-4). This is our calling now in this time between the two advents of our Savior. In Jesus, God has come and he has saved us. And so we pray: Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.