

Toward home: Zephaniah 3:14-20

December 12, 2006

It is out of character for Zephaniah, one of the gloomiest of the Old Testament prophets, to offer this joyful song of promise: "I will remove disaster from you. . . . I will gather the outcast. . . . I will bring you home, says the Lord." Zephaniah took special delight in predicting "the day of the Lord," when things were going to turn out badly for the people of Judah and Israel. Zephaniah could give the Grim Reaper a run for his money.

Because the bright message of the lectionary reading is strikingly different from the rest of his prophecy, biblical scholars suggest that it was added during the Babylonian captivity, when the children of Israel were languishing in exile. What could be more reassuring to people who were far from home than to receive word that there was a place where they belonged, and, as my southern grandmother was fond of saying, that they could "get there directly"?

What happened to our ancestors in faith was this. A foreign enemy had overrun their homes and destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They were bound as prisoners and hauled over hundreds of desert miles to a strange land, where they were forced to live among people whose language, religion, customs and habits were different from theirs.

Sometimes in my own country I feel as if I am living in a foreign land. I am not referring to the ethnic and religious diversity of our nation, which is thereby made richer. I am referring to experiences that make me ask myself, "Who are these people, and where did they learn to behave that way?"

In a doctor's office, the fellow sitting across from me shouts into a cell phone as if no one else is in the room. Beside me a child pitches a whining fit, yet the mother never looks up from her issue of *People* magazine. Out on the interstate hot-shot drivers whiz dangerously in and out of lanes. It's every man or woman for himself or herself, and I feel far from home.

My experiences of bad behavior are not restricted to urban areas. Recently I went "home" to the small town where I grew up. I am not sure why I was on this

pilgrimage, but once there I decided to look for my family's homestead, and slowed down at intersections as I read street signs. Three different drivers shook their fists at me or honked their horns when I hesitated before making a turn.

The day was not completely lost, however. The high point turned out to be a stop at the cemetery, where I visited the grave of a beloved aunt who lived with us for a time when I was young. As I stood in the heat of the afternoon beside her grave, a bright butterfly appeared, hovered in the air and then winged its way skyward. It was a sign to me that, in the end, our home is with God, and God's home is with us.

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "The human spirit is incapable of ridding itself of an abiding sense of homelessness." It is as if we never feel quite at home anywhere but are always seeking that sweet place. We press our way through mobbed airport corridors and clogged highways as if our lives depended on getting to a place where we belong for Christmas. We yearn for the day when the distance between time and eternity will be finally and fully bridged; until then, we understand exile.

Think how it might be for a woman who lived for 50 years in her own home and always shared Christmas with her husband. After the children were grown, they'd come back home, bringing their own kids and spouses; all would gather around the family Christmas tree and eat Christmas cookies. But then the woman lost her husband. The house had to be sold, and the woman moved into a nursing home. The kids go to see her when they can.

Families with children make up the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. Think of mothers and fathers trying as best they can to raise their children, but having no homes in which to raise them. Think of the gay son or daughter who wants to come home for Christmas but who fears being judged and rejected by family and by church. Think of our nation this December. While we are in limbo, trying to figure out how to make our way, fear, frustration and anxiety abide.

Every once in a while a member of the congregation I serve says something like this to me: "I am sorry you have not seen me in church for a while, but I have gotten to where I just cannot come any more."

"Why?" I ask.

"I don't know what happens, but I will come in, get a bulletin and sit down. The choir will start singing, or you will read a passage of scripture, and the floodgates open. I

am in tears. It is embarrassing.” Why be embarrassed? Worship is homecoming. It is putting ourselves in the place where it is safe to tell the truth, safe to be who we really are in the presence of the holy and loving God. We come with broken places and unanswered questions. God takes us in, and yes, sometimes it feels so good that we weep from sheer relief.

According to Luke, during the reign of Caesar Augustus all went to their own towns to be registered (Luke 2:3). The pilgrims included Joseph and Mary, who was expecting a child. In the city of David called Bethlehem, the baby was born, and as Zephaniah had promised, the exile was over. The Lord our God was here to stay.