

“Coming Home”
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I have a confession. Now, you may already know that I am a bit of a sap. Accordingly, I am a total sucker for a Hallmark ad that sometimes runs this time of year. I cry just about every time I see it. Have you seen that one? It starts with a tight close up of a young white boy, looking out a frosty window into falling snow. He looks sad. He is waiting for his brother to join him and their family, and there is a blizzard. Will the brother make it? His family calls the boy in to join them in their warm and cheery living room, where they have gathered to sing Christmas songs together.

The boy is called to sing—“O Holy Night,” (my all time favorite Christmas song, no less). Now, this is a problem, because *this* is *the* song he always sang with his brother. So he begins—a bit sadly, it seems to be dawning on him that his brother really may not make it home for Christmas this year. Then, just as he rounds out the first verse—just as he begins to sing “Fall on your knees...”—his brother comes through the door behind him and joins in the song perfectly. The family is elated, the brothers sing beautifully, and your pastor just blubbers away....

It is such a simple and powerful demonstration of the power of family...the power of love...and the power of coming home. It makes it seem like coming home is something that we should strive to do against all odds: dang the blizzard, full speed ahead!

But it's not always easy to come home, is it? Even the Israelites returning home to Israel after the exile in Babylon needed to be encouraged to take off their robe of sorrow and affliction in today's reading from Baruch. They had been imprisoned for decades. They had been residing in a foreign place many, many miles from their home: the *very land* of which they considered to be *holy*, and God's home. And now—all at once, and against all odds—they were free! Now they were able to go home and reclaim their land and heritage. And they *still* needed to be reminded to take off their robe of sorrows and affliction!

It is easy to get stuck in the past. It is easy to cling to the things that can keep us from coming home: even to our most holy and beloved places...even to God. Every year the holiday season is full of obstacles. Our culture ups the ante from the already dizzying array of relentless advertisements. Now sixteen minutes of every television hour pulse with modernized, loud Christmas tunes, lyrically changed to attract a wider shopping audience. Billboards bristle with reminders to stock up on the latest trendy gifts much more often than they remind us of Jesus. Sales abound on food and clothing and frivolous things, enticing us to focus on acquiring presents rather than abiding in God's presence.

In this “most wonderful time of the year,” we are constantly encouraged to eat a little of this, or drink a little of that to lift and conform our moods in the proper holiday spirit. We are directed to be joyful, no matter how we might actually feel, even though it is quite common for people to get depressed during the holidays amid all the expected and forced merriment.

Even when we are in the holiday spirit, and fully on board, we are bound to be unusually busy. We buy and prepare epic amounts of food. We clean our houses after each celebration to ready it for the next one, and the next one. Maybe we are busy crossing the long distances between ourselves and our loved ones. Perhaps we are fretful because we will be unable to do so this year. And often we do all that work busying ourselves in order to break bread or drink a little something with friends or family with whom we are fighting on some level. It might be a new dispute, or the seasonal squabbles that rear their head each year. Or maybe everything has changed since last year due to a lost job, or a broken marriage that decayed into divorce. Sometimes there is simply no family left to come home to. Living through the holidays can sometimes feel like being clothed in a robe of sorrow and affliction.

We all need reminders to change our garb. We all need reminders to put on “the robe of the righteousness that comes from God...”¹ Not by *buying* it. You can’t buy your way into grace. Not through getting even busier. You can’t simply work your way into grace, either. Not by stringing lights and singing even beloved songs—but by coming home to God. Advent and Christmas offer us the opportunity to journey back to the places we find to be most holy. These seasons offer us the chance to more concretely and intentionally ground ourselves in God’s grace. When we turn to one another in our worship, in our church gatherings and throughout the fabric of our lives, we open ourselves to connecting to God through one another. Even when our families of origin or choice may challenge or fail us, we can turn to the family we know here: God’s family.

That’s every one of us. That’s everyone who makes the way through the obstacles our culture places between us and church. That’s everyone who works to avoid the distractions that track us into false merriment at the expense of a deeper joy. We gather here because we seek an abiding joy rather than a seasonal or fleeting one. The deeper joy we connect with in knowing God can help us to more fully and truly join into the celebration of the season. God’s joyful presence in our lives can help us to latch on to a sincere and enduring joy, which knows no bounds.

In this sometimes challenging, and very busy, time of year we can make our ways through any blizzard which our culture may create. We can take off the robe of affliction and sorrow that comes from forced merriment and consumer frenzy, and allow God to lead us “with joy, in the

¹ Baruch 5:2.

light of his glory, with...mercy and righteousness..."² This Advent...this Christmas...this whole coming year, come to church, come to your church family and come home to God! Amen?

² Baruch 5:9, edited.

Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God.

2Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;

3for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.

4For God will give you evermore the name,
'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory'.

5Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look towards the east,

and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.

6For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;

but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

7For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.

8The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.

9For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.