

Coming Home

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[0 : 00] We are so happy to be here together with you all. As I said at the beginning of the service, this is one of our favorite times to gather. It's one of my favorite times of the year.

I'm sure that many of you agree. If you know anything about Lessons and Carols services, we do ours a little differently. Typically, this is a Christmas Eve service.

So you may be wondering, if you know anything about this at all, why would we do our Lessons and Carols service so early in December? And the reason is a very practical one. And if you're from D.C. or live in D.C., you probably know why.

It's that when Christmas time comes, most everybody leaves. People go home. They go elsewhere. There are a lot of people who are here who have grown up in D.C., but there are also a lot of people who came from somewhere else.

And home is somewhere else. And so you come and you are here most of the time, but Christmas rolls around, and most people, many people leave. Christmas is a time of year when we think about home, when we long for home.

[1 : 09] You know, it's a time of year when we want to be home. And so nobody's blaming you for leaving. If you do stick around, it's a great time to be in D.C., much less traffic. But it's a time that makes us long for home.

And if you're lucky enough to have a home and a family, a hometown, then you want to be there at Christmas. For people who don't have a home to go to, for people who come from a broken family, this can be a particularly hard time of year.

If you're lonely in other parts of the year, that loneliness ramps up. Because Christmas is a time that makes us long for home. And in fact, the connection between home and Christmas, as deep as we know it to be, it actually is a lot deeper than maybe any of us realize.

And that's what we want to spend a few minutes talking about this evening. That longing for home that is connected to Christmas. The book of Isaiah, which is an old book, it's in the Old Testament. It was written around the 8th century B.C., so a long time ago. It talks a lot about this longing for home. It talks a lot about home. And in particular, one of the first lessons that we read this evening was Isaiah chapter 35.

[2 : 30] And this shows us two things about home. So what I want to do is I want to walk through Isaiah 35 very briefly. And then I just want to show you two things. It shows us something about homecoming.

Or I'm sorry. It shows us something about homesickness. Homesickness. And then it shows us something about homecoming. So let's pray as we look into God's Word together. Lord, what a great night to come together and celebrate the wonder and the awe of you entering into this world. That we long for the God of the universe to speak to us. And Christmas shows us that you have indeed spoken to us through your Son, Jesus Christ.

And so we pray that, Lord, as we open your Word together, that we would, as we endeavor to understand your written Word, that by the power of your Spirit, we would actually come face to face with the reality of your living Word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So if you know anything about Isaiah 35 or have a Bible or a phone or something that you can pull it up and look at it, it's a beautiful, beautiful poem.

[3 : 43] And it's a poem about pilgrims. It's a poem about pilgrims who are wandering through the wilderness and they're trying to find their way home. And so as it starts out, they're in a desert wasteland.

Imagine rocks, kind of a lifeless terrain with rocks and hills and sand and crags and ravines. And these pilgrims are wandering in the wilderness.

But even as they go, their surroundings begin to transform. It says in verse 1, The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. And it says the desert becomes like Lebanon and Carmel and Sharon. And these are other places. And for the original audience, these images, these would have evoked images of lush, fertile, flourishing landscape full of beauty and richness and life. These are places of extraordinary beauty. And so it evokes these images and it says that the desert begins to be transformed into this.

[4 : 55] And then as you go down in the poem, it begins to say that the pilgrims themselves, as they walk, that they begin to be transformed. It says the blind receive their sight.

The deaf begin to be able to hear. The lame are able to get up and walk. The mute are able to sing. And then at the crescendo of this poem, they come to this great highway in verses 8 through 10. Now, we can't imagine this. We all grew up with the interstate system. And we grew up with the sense that we can be anywhere we want to be in a few hours or a couple of days. But imagine a world like this where there's just desert and wilderness and rocks and ravines and mountains. Travel was hard. It was arduous. It took forever to get anywhere. And imagine just coming upon a highway. A causeway raised up above it all that was flat and clear that went straight in the direction that you wanted to go.

How amazing that would be. So they come upon this highway that goes directly into Zion. And so they enter into Zion singing and full of joy.

[6 : 06] Now, in one sense, this is an old story. It's the story of the people of Israel. It's the story that you see written throughout the Old Testament. Right?

So those of you who are familiar, the first half of the Bible we call the Old Testament. And it tells the story of Israel. Israel, they're pilgrims. They're trying to get home. And each time they think they've arrived at home, it never lasts.

So they're in Egypt. They're slaves in Egypt. And they just want to get free and get through the wilderness to the promised land. But when they get there, it isn't what they hoped it would be. And then later we see them in exile in Babylon. And they just want to get out of Babylon. But even when they get out of Babylon, it never becomes, they never arrive at where they hoped they would be.

And then hundreds of years later, you see them again in Jesus' day under Roman occupation. And still, they're not home. They don't have a home. They're still longing for a place that they can call their own, where they can belong.

[7 : 12] And have peace. They're ever wandering, ever seeking that home. So in one sense, that's the story of Israel. But as we kind of back up and look at the whole story of Scripture, we ask, you know, what does this 8th century B.C. poem have to do with us?

Well, the Bible actually says that Israel is a kind of microcosm of the world. So in other words, Israel's story is actually the story of all of us.

It's the story of the world in miniature. And we've actually been recounting this through the lessons. So in the larger story, what we see is, is that while we may not be physically homeless, the Bible says that we're all spiritually homeless.

We're all spiritually homeless. That we are pilgrims trying to find our way home. And this passage helps us understand our homesickness.

And then it shows us how we are able to finally come home once and for all. So let's look briefly at these two themes in this poem.

[8 : 25] First, the theme of homesickness. Do you know where the word homesick comes from? You ever looked up the history? I do things like that.

I don't know why. But I was curious one day and I looked it up. And homesickness and the concept of being homesick was actually originally a medical term. You can actually find this or its counterpart, nostalgia, in medical textbooks.

And it was considered a huge health crisis during the Civil War. Thousands of troops were diagnosed with homesickness. And a number of them died and the cause of death was homesickness.

Severe nostalgia. The idea being that there's something harmful or debilitating or destructive about being away from one's home.

The idea that the longer you're away, the more it wears you down and breaks you down. And some people ultimately succumb to it. And you know, you see this very clearly in people who are actually homeless.

[9 : 35] Right? So real homelessness, in the physical sense of the word, is destructive. Psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, physically destructive.

It's debilitating. It's dehumanizing. Well, Christians believe that we are all spiritually homeless. Because we believe that God is our home.

In the poem, when it talks about Zion, that's actually a place where you can come into the presence of the Lord. And so we believe that we are all in this world spiritually homeless.

Apart from relationship with God. It teaches, the Bible teaches that God created this world to be our home and himself to be our home.

But when we rejected God, we decided we wanted to leave, which you see in Genesis chapter 3. We decided we wanted to live however we wanted.

[10 : 37] We decided we wanted to be our own gods. And so it says that we are in many ways like runaway teenagers. Who say to their father and their mother, I know everything I need to know.

I can do it alone. And they run away from home and they begin to live life on the street. And in many ways, we are portrayed spiritually in that way. We've run away and we're spiritually homeless.

And now because of that, Christians believe that the world has become like a wilderness. So when we see things like poverty or racism, injustice, oppression, that all of these are signs that we're living in a spiritual wilderness.

They're signs that we are spiritually homeless. And even in our own lives, sickness and aging and decay and death, that these are signs that we are spiritually homeless.

Because God is our home, life apart from God makes us homeless. And that is destructive and debilitating and dehumanizing. Ultimately, we won't survive it.

[11 : 47] And I think on some level we know this. Now you may be thinking, I don't believe any of this. I absolutely know that this is not the case. And that's completely understandable.

But I think even if you don't agree with all of the theology, on some deep level, we actually experience our spiritual homelessness in different ways.

There's a German word. I'm not a German speaker, so I'll do my best. But the German word is Sinsucht. And Sinsucht means or describes a feeling that is a kind of a combination of two things. On the one hand, it's a feeling that includes a sense of incompleteness. There's got to be more to life than that. There's got to be more to the world than this.

There's something missing. Incompleteness. And that is paired with a longing. A longing for an ideal. Some ideal life that we have never actually experienced.

[12 : 51] So incompleteness and longing. And this word is fascinating. C.S. Lewis described it as, quote, a feeling of incompleteness.

Oh, as I said, paired with a profound yearning for some ideal. So this isn't just homesickness. This isn't just longing for the home that you came from.

This is saying that actually there are times when you miss home and you long for it and you want to be there. And imagine this for a second. You know, those of you who are traveling somewhere else for Christmas.

You think about home and you want to be there and you miss it. And maybe you just recently moved to D.C. And you can't wait to get back home. And then what happens when you actually get home?

I mean, if you're totally honest. You don't have to tell your family. But you get there and it's great. But it's just not quite as great as you thought it was going to be.

[13 : 49] Or it's really, really, really great. But then the greatness kind of starts to wane after a few days. Right? And then after about a week you're like, oh, yeah, I remember why I moved to D.C.

And then you go back to D.C., right? And you say, I'll see you, you know, at Easter. And this is the reality. You get home but it's never quite what you hoped it would be.

It's weird but Zinzuck describes this feeling where you can feel homesick even when you're home. Have you ever been home and still felt homesick?

What is that? And you realize that your longing is not just to be home in some place somewhere. Your longing is more a desire to be in the kind of place you wish home could be.

It's a longing to be in the kind of place you wish home could be. That's this deeper longing. I was going to quote him a moment ago. C.S. Lewis called this that inconsolable longing.

[14:54] Inconsolable because nothing here can satisfy it or console it. He describes it as this. The scent of a flower we have not found. The echo of a tune we have not heard.

News from a country we have never yet visited. And I think this is the feeling behind a lot of other feelings. It's the feeling that's in the background that we falsely attribute to other things.

Right? I think this is what drives the if-onlys of our life. I don't know if you have if-onlys. I have tons of if-onlys. Right? If only I could find my true soulmate.

That's what some people think. Then I will have arrived. Right? If only I could get enough affirmation. Then I'll finally feel good about myself. Right?

If only I could have a family and kids. Then life will begin. This is all just kind of a prelude to when life actually begins. If only I could find something meaningful to do with my life.

[16:01] Really make a difference. Right? These are the if-onlys. The implicit belief is that if only I could get this or that or arrive. Then life will begin. Then I will feel peace.

Then the longing will be satisfied. And then I will be able to settle into this life with satisfaction. And I think that chasing this idea.

Chasing these if-onlys. I think this drives people out of relationships. It drives them to date one person after another. After another. After another. After another. It drives people out of marriages.

It drives people out of jobs. Changing jobs every couple of years. Maybe the next one will kind of scratch that itch. Right? I think it drives people to move from place to place to place to place.

But underneath all of this is that inconsolable longing. So Christians believe this inconsolable longing is what it feels like to be spiritually homeless.

[17:03] Spiritually cut off from God. And that nothing will ever satisfy this longing. Which then brings us to the second point. If we are all home sick.

Literally made spiritually sick. Because we are cut off from our home. Then how do we come home? What does a homecoming actually look like? And is it possible? Because listen.

You have to deal with that longing somehow. You have to deal with it somehow. Because it's there. And it's just nagging at the back of your mind. So the way I see it.

I think that there are three options. Three ways we can deal with this. The first is the avoidance approach. And this is something that I think all people. Christians, non-Christians can fall into this. The avoidance approach. Because some people rather than trying to satisfy that longing. They just try to escape it. Or avoid it. Or minimize it. Or numb themselves to it. And maybe for some of us here.

[18:01] This has driven us into things like substance abuse. Or addiction. Addictions of various kinds. I think they're all driven by this. There was the actor Russell Brand. I don't know if you know anything about Russell Brand.

But he's had a long time struggle with drugs and alcohol earlier in his life. And he wrote a very vulnerable piece in The Guardian a few years ago. Where he's really honest and transparent about his struggle with addiction.

And listen to what he says in this article. He says drugs and alcohol are not my problem. Reality is my problem. He says drugs and alcohol are my solution.

And then a little bit further down he says very plainly. I look to drugs and booze to fill up a hole in me. I'm trying to fill up a hole.

That's that inconsolable longing. Right? But for most of us. I mean I hope. Most of us. If you're there and you're struggling. Maybe you connect with that. But I think maybe there are a number of us here who.

[19:04] By God's grace have not fallen into addiction. With drugs or alcohol. At least not overtly. And for most of us. I think there are other ways that we escape.

And avoid having to feel this longing. Let me ask you this. Why are we busy all the time? Why are we so freaking busy? This city is insane with busyness.

We drive each other crazy with our busyness. Man, you ask anybody. How are you doing? I'm so busy. I'm overwhelmed. It's that time of year. But then you ask them three months down the road.

I'm so busy. I'm overwhelmed. It's that time of year. Well I guess it's always that time of year. I guess that's the way we roll here. But it's insane how busy we are. I think that we fill our lives with diversions.

We live for the weekends. We live for vacations. We're always going to the next thing. And we're never allowing ourselves a moment to actually stop and reflect.

[20 : 02] And so let me ask you this. Why? Why the full on sprint 24-7? Why are we so addicted to our smartphones?

Oh, I'm so addicted. Why? Why are we so addicted to the 24-hour news cycle? Why do we have to know everything that's happening the moment it's happening?

Why is that the case? Why are we so addicted to social media? I mean, I'll just be totally honest.

The second I have to wait for anything, whether I'm at the grocery store or at the bank or sitting in traffic, the moment I pull up to a red light, bam, it's out.

I don't even know how it got there. I'm just sitting there driving along, and I'm like, oh, there's traffic. Bam! And I look down, and I'm like, it's there, and it's open, and it's open to my news feed. And I realize that I'm looking at it.

And then, you know, I'm putting people at risk. Right? I'm risking ruining my life. Why? Because I can't stand to just sit there for 20 seconds.

[21 : 15] Do you connect with this at all? Am I alone in this? Maybe I need therapy. I don't know. But I think that we can relate to this, right? There's this great moment, and maybe you've seen it, where the comedian Louis C.K., he was on Conan O'Brien, and he starts talking about how everyone is constantly on their devices.

And we're always texting, and we're all, you know, Snapchat, Instagram, all these things, and we're all the time we're doing this. And it's interesting. He says that the reason that we do it, and I'll quote him here. He says, because underneath everything in your life, there's that thing.

He says that forever empty. He calls it the forever empty. And he's talking about the inconsolable longing.

And he essentially says that when you look around, he says everybody is frantically trying to keep themselves busy and texting and just, you know, constantly going and going and going because we don't want to face that longing.

Right? And so you're sitting in traffic, and you slow down, and you stop, and you have a second to think, and it begins to kind of creep up. And as he says, it begins to visit on you. You know, it begins to creep in, and you feel it.

[22 : 25] And so what do you do? It's like, you know, bam! And then you're able to distract yourself, and it begins to go away as you read about the latest crazy thing Donald Trump said.

And the next thing you know, it's gone, and you're not thinking about it anymore. And then, oh, green light, and you can go on with your life. And I think that he's pretty insightful. You know, I can't prove it, but I wonder if there's a correlation between all of these statistics that talk about the decline of religious affiliation and involvement, on the one hand.

If there's a correlation between that and the rise of smartphone and technology addiction on the other. I just wonder if there's a connection. But if you've never felt this longing, if all this time I'm talking about this inconsolable longing, you've never felt it.

I would just encourage you to think about your life and the last time that you had a significant amount of time to just sit and be. With no distractions.

You know, I was at a conference this past week, kind of a retreat, some pastors. And the guy leading it said, I want to send you away, and I just want you to sit for five minutes. Sit for five minutes.

[23 : 41] Well, what do we do? Well, don't do anything. Just sit in the presence of God. Well, okay, so do we pray? No, don't pray. Just sit in the presence of God. Well, what about if we know, should we quote Scripture? No, no Scripture.

Don't take your Bibles. Don't take our Bibles? No. Just go and just be in the presence of God. Well, what if mantra? No mantras. Don't. Well, what if we think about things? Well, don't think. Just be in the presence of God.

And all these questions. And finally, the guy's like, just get out of here. And so all of these kind of know-it-all, do-everything-right pastors, we go out and we sit. And we just sort of sit there and be in God's presence.

And all these people came back and just shared about how crazy that was. Five minutes. When's the last time you just sat with yourself and just allowed those feelings to come, to see where they might lead you?

The point is, if this is a spiritual problem, if it is in fact a spiritual problem, and we are spiritually homeless, you can only avoid it so long. And then at some point, you have to respond and seek a solution.

[24 : 50] And if it's a spiritual problem, you need a spiritual solution. And so that really only leaves us with two options. The second option is the religious option. The religious option says, look at the various religions.

And by the way, if you look at all the various religions out there, it's interesting that most religions around the world agree that there's something not right with the world. They agree that there's something missing. They agree that we need something more.

And then virtually every religion offers the same answer. Virtually every religion says in some form or another that we're here and we need to go somewhere else.

We need to get out of here and go to where home is. Go to where those longings will be satisfied, right? So through obedience or meditation or good deeds or devotion or moral excellence, we can find our way home or transcend this world or reach nirvana or achieve inner peace or reach paradise.

And, you know, even many Christians in our country think that that's what the Christian faith is all about. Live a good life, die, go to heaven, and you're home.

[26 : 02] They all teach basically the same thing. So the religious approach says get to work. And the hope is eventually if you do everything you're supposed to do and you do it well enough, at least up to the minimum standard, be a good enough person, fulfill all the requirements, then someday you might get there.

You know, maybe. You never really know until you die. And then hopefully it works out for the best. Not in this life, but hopefully in the life to come.

So there's the avoidance option. And then there's the religious option. But the third option is radically different. And this is the Christmas option.

This is the Christmas option. We said that Isaiah 35 is all about pilgrims who are trying to find their way home. They're trying to get somewhere out of the wilderness.

Well, what's interesting is you recognize that these people spiritually, they represent people who are searching for God. And then what's interesting is it talks all about their pilgrimage.

[27 : 05] And then right in the middle of the passage, verse 4 says, quote, Behold, your God will come with a vengeance. With the recompense of God, he will come and save you.

So it says they're searching for God. But in fact, what happens, what happens is that God actually comes to them. Right where they are, in the wilderness, God comes right there.

And the way they know that it's God is because they look around and they begin to see the eyes of the blind are open. The deaf can hear. The lame can walk. The mute can sing.

They begin to see the world around them transforming. And they know that has to be the presence of God. And of course, in John chapter 1, that lesson I read a moment ago, which is John's version of the Christmas story, by the way.

He says in verse 14, He's talking about the birth of Jesus on Christmas.

[28 : 12] And he's saying Jesus, who is the eternal word, who is God. This Jesus is God coming and dwelling among us.

The literal translation is pitching his tent. Or we might say making himself at home. God has come and made himself at home among us.

What do you do when you make yourself at home? If you say that to a guest, it says, I want you to make whatever adjustments you need to make so that this will fit you and be as much a home to you as your own home.

That's exactly what God does. He comes and he begins to renew and restore this world and us. Why? Because he intends to dwell here for eternity with us.

And then you see that this highway appears. Well, what is the highway? Well, it wouldn't really make sense until Jesus, a little bit later in his ministry, in John 14, verse 6, says, I am the way.

[29 : 19] Right? I'm the highway. If you know me, by knowing me, you are on the highway. And what is a highway? It takes you straight into the presence of God. If you know me, he's saying, and I give you my life, I am the highway into the very presence of God.

And this passage shows us that one day Jesus will renew the whole world. The desert and the wilderness will become a place of flourishing and life and beauty. Injustice and oppression and

poverty and sickness and death will be no more.

But until that happens, until Jesus comes again, now is the time for those of us who are spiritually homeless to come to this highway. To come to Jesus Christ.

Who brings us into the knowledge and the presence of God here and now. And that's why, by the way, the church should be, if it's not, that's why we're passionate about homelessness.

And about the plight of refugees. And about the plight of immigrants. And about orphans. People who don't have a home. People who don't have a family. This is why we are centrally passionate about the value of hospitality.

[30 : 31] What's happening every time you give somebody a home. Or every time you welcome somebody into your home. And make them feel at home in your space. What are you doing? These are signposts that reflect and point to the God.

Who himself has come to make this a home for us. To make us a home in himself. So that renewal is already beginning.

And we in this community have seen many, many, many signs of renewal. Lives transformed. Marriages restored. In just a moment after we sing, we're going to hear one such story. But I want to say this as we close.

A lot of people go home for Christmas. A lot of people go home for Christmas. But the Christmas story actually tells us that we don't have to go anywhere to find our true home. Because the story of Christmas is this.

That home has come to us. And the invitation no matter who or where we are. Is that we can right now pray to Jesus. Turn from our life of wandering.

[31 : 38] Put our trust in his grace and forgiveness. And be welcomed onto that highway. And trusting that he alone can speak to the longing in our souls.

With the promise that one day our longings will be satisfied once and for all. In the home of his embrace. In the home of his embrace.