

Home

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Ancient Witness: John 14:1-4

I can remember my first year at summer camp. I was 7 or 8 years old. It was a new and scary experience. I got use to it O.K., but there was one kid I remember, who stayed inside the cabin all day the first day. And by the morning of the second day he was gone.

We were talking about it in our cabin they way 7 and 8 year old boys do: What do you suppose was wrong? Poison ivy? Snake bite? Was it something we said or did?

Then we got the word. He went home because he was homesick. (Gasp!) And strangely enough, that explanation seemed enough for us. It made perfect sense to us. After all, if you're sick, you're sick. But we had some unresolved questions. What was being homesick like? Did he throw up? Did he have to go to the hospital? And perhaps most pressing on our young minds, was it contagious? All during that week I can remember checking myself for symptoms to make sure I wasn't coming down with that dreaded illness. And since we didn't know the affects, most of us weren't sure if we had it or not.

We can build houses with hammers and saws and wood and nails. (It is wonderful to watch houses going up for people who don't have them, and to see a congregation helping to build them. Two of my previous congregations did this through Habitat for Humanity.)

We can build a house. But we wish for the occupants to have a home. This is something we cannot create. No amount of money or power can call forth a home. There's a story of someone who was talking to a homeless family and asking the question: "Tell me what is it like to be without a home?" And the small voice of the little girl responded: "Oh, we have a home, just not a house to put it in yet."

"Home" is not a place or a building or a structure. Home is the memory of shared experience. Home is a feeling of a warm embrace. Home is the sound of familiar voices. Home is the smell of food prepared with love. We experience home with all of our senses, in our full humanity, with our whole being—mind, heart and soul. Home is the memory of shared experience, the communion of those in the past.

Think with me now. Where do you call home?

Years ago I had the chance to go home again, to Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was there to participate in a wedding of a childhood friend. I had been away for about 10 years. Although the wedding took place not far from my old home, I just could not bring myself to drive through the old neighborhood, and I'm not sure why. I don't know what I thought would happen if I did. Something inside was resisting. Would it be too painful as all the memories came flooding back? Did I want to remember things just as they were, suspended in eternity? I'm not sure. I almost didn't go, but something else pulled me. As if for my own health, I needed to remember, and I needed to bless my memories. As I approached the familiar neighborhood, I was suddenly aware that my heart was pounding, my hands were sweaty against the steering wheel, and my breathing was short and fast.

I used to ride these streets on my bike with such ease. Right here is where I got hit by a car. I dragged my bent up bike home from there. There was a ball field where we spent every summer afternoon until we couldn't see, where each day there was a home run or a diving catch. Each day held moments of glory. There's a field where we would explore, follow the creek in the ravine, build forts. Most of it has been taken over by expensive homes now. The pond was over there, where I fell through the ice when we were ice skating. Over there is where we started a small fire and blamed it on Paul.

In the pre-dawn mornings we walked to school, snow crunching under our feet. There's where I broke my arm playing football in the street. Red rover, red rover, let Steve come over. And who kicked the can? All ye, all ye, in come free!

I stopped in the front of the house. And with my mind, I could see inside. There would be a roaring fire. My boots and pants would be drying, and I'd be warming myself on the hearth. What would we eat? Probably split pea soup with ham hocks. I could see my desk, and in the corner, where I carved my name. And there's the banister where we would sit and listen to the grown-ups talk.

Home is the memory of relationships. And while many have never had a house of their own, they nevertheless have had a home. And yet, there are some who have had little experience of home, where the house had become a prison of fear or violence.

Robert Frost wrote so well ("The Death of the Hired Man"):

*Home is the place where,
when you have to go there,
They have to take you in...*

*I should have called it
Something you somehow
haven't to deserve.*

According to John, Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" As human beings, we yearn to have continuity with our past, to be connected to where to come from. We are pulled to our origins, and pre-conscious memories call to be blessed and affirmed.

It is that experience prior to our birth to which we are drawn. It is that home where we begin and where we end, the communion of those before and after us. Paul talked about human beings as being created in such a way that we should "feel after" and "seek God." (Acts 17:26-27) We are made in such a way that we should try to find our home. "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee," wrote Augustine. It is kind of like a homing pigeon: somehow we have this imprint of where we ought to be, a vague recollection of where we should return. Our fluttering wings cannot stop until we reach our destination. But unlike the homing pigeon, we often become distracted from our course. Jesus once said, "I am the way" of "I am the journey." To find our way back is what we are called for. Prodigal and perfectionist alike, we hear the call, "Come home to love."

And we don't have to wait until the end of our lives to enter our eternal home. We can find our home in God right here, right now! It is something we can touch and experience in the immediacy of the present

moment—a shelter from the stormy blast. “A refuge and strength,” wrote the Psalmist, “a very present help in trouble.” (Psalm 46:1) Not simply a retreat from the strife and pain, but like the civil rights leaders, John Lewis and C.T. Vivian, who both died this week, home helps us to persevere—to be strengthened to enter the struggle and to fight injustice.

It was G.K. Chesterton who once said, “You know you are on the right road to be homesick at home.” Although many of us may not exactly feel homesick, we perhaps do not feel totally at home in the world. This is not only natural, but this is good. To be too comfortable and complacent in this world is a spiritual danger. There is an uneasiness, a restlessness, as we search to be true to ourselves. We are stricken with an incurable God-sickness. We have a hunger and a thirst for what is righteous and good that needs to be satisfied. This is a blessing, said Jesus.

But to search, we must overcome our inner resistance to remember the time before our beginning. Perhaps we are mourning that loss of continuity. There is an undeniable break between worlds. But memory is the bridge; it is redemptive.

I have this picture of a beautiful orange Monarch butterfly, and under it a caption:

*This butterfly begins a journey of 5,000 miles.
It will not reach its destination, but
three hundred million “grandchildren” of these
butterflies will return “home” to the same place.*

*Even with strength and perseverance
—often flying over 200 miles a day—
no individual Monarch can complete to 5,000 mile migration
that brings health and survival to the species,
and colorful beauty to September gardens.*

*No scientist has ever discovered how the instructions and route
are transmitted to succeeding generations.
But new generations reach, unfailingly,
a distant “home” they had never known.
No one knows the process of cooperation
and communication that makes this happen.*

But there is a way. Together we seek it.

This is an important thing about finding our way. We need past, present and future generations. We need tradition. We need community, communion of the saints. On the journey home, it helps to travel with others. This would be the church at its best.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott shares a story told by her pastor:

When she was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. This little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn’t find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car,

and they drove around until finally she saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she hold him firmly, "This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Lamott concludes:

And that is why I have stayed so close to mine—because no matter how bad I am feeling how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.

At its best the church is not home, but we can find our way from there. Somehow, as we help others, we are helped.

We are, all of us, on a great quest in this world. We are, all of us, trying to find our way home. And when it dawns on us what our real home is, then we can live this present adventure to the fullest. When we become assured of our true home, then during this earthly journey we can feel joyfully homesick. Such flashes of recognition and assurance are moments of "crazy, holy grace," says Frederick Buchner. He calls them:

Crazy because who ever could have predicted it? ...And holy because these moments of grace come ultimately from farther away than Oz and deeper down than doom.

For this home ours remains, no matter how long we have been away. It is lasting.

Listen to these familiar words of the poet (William Wordsworth):

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar;
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.*