

A Yearning for Home

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Every once in a while, I receive an epiphany of sorts related to the Advent or Christmas seasons—an epiphany before Epiphany. This doesn't happen often, insofar as the literary landscape of this time of year has been fully excavated, if not strip-mined. But on a rare occasion, I discover a gold nugget of insight I've never noticed before or thought much about.

My newest revelation is this: did you ever notice how many terms related to Christmas begin with “ho”? (I'm sure you were expecting something more profound than that, but little things intrigue small minds.) Aside from Santa's happy little howl (“Ho, ho, ho!”) are the equally festive words: holiday, holly, and hoof-beats on the housetop. For the religiously-inclined, there's hope, homage, and the proverbial pastoral homily. We know the Virgin Mary was not a “ho”—no, no, no, but the Holy Ghost is!

For the pure in heart, Christmas is a time for being hospitable, honest, and honorable. Whereas sadistically-minded Grinches will focus only on things that horrify, or invoke hostility, or are grossly homicidal, or heading us toward an apocalyptic holocaust! Ultimately, both those who are spiritual and those who are not recognize this is simply a season to host house guests, hob-nob with hors d'oeuvres, and go hog-wild hop-scotching to stores until you've put yourself in hock. Ho-ho-ho!

However, there is one “ho” word that rises above all others, ordinarily on the minds of most people and spirited by memories that affect us deeply, i.e., home. “Home” (whatever that means to us personally and wherever it is for each of us) is an enticing image (a warm fuzzy) that is meant for a season like this—that sentimentally pulls on the heartstrings and taps into our individual memories and cultural mythologies, especially when families

gather to celebrate the holidays. People long for going home and spending the Yuletide with relatives, especially if they are at a distance from one another and haven't been together for a while.

The holidays of December seduce us with this longing once the fall arrives. It's the customary time to be in company with the ones you love. All we need to hear is Bing Crosby croon, "I'll be home for Christmas...," it melts many a heart. There's a natural yearning for home.

Psychiatrist Keith Ablow once described the association many adults have with memories of their childhood.

Our homes are more than financial assets. They have deep emotional meaning. For those of us fortunate enough to have grown up in houses owned by our parents, they were the backdrop for our childhood memories — the places we played and argued and hung our artwork and marked the door jam with pencil lines as we grew taller. For better or worse, the houses of our childhoods represented to many of us a good measure of the success our parents had attained, an outward expression of how hard work had paid off in comfort and safety and the respect of the community.¹

Though this description is fairly conventional, it won't reflect every household. In fact, when this article was written a few years ago, Ablow was offering counsel to those who were in crisis losing their homes—becoming homeless—due to foreclosure.

When people look back at their lives, almost all can identify periods of great turmoil, personally or professionally or financially...No patient has ever described the real assets provided by his or her parents by the kind of house or apartment the family lived in. To a person, the accounting has always been emotional: Did he or she feel well-loved? Was he or she listened to? Were his or her dreams encouraged? If you want to put something that lasts "in the bank" for your kids, tell them that whether you live in a big house, a little house or an apartment (or even in temporary housing) that you will always be a family and that you will think about them every day and kiss them goodnight wherever they go to sleep...There is great power in shifting from seeing oneself as a victim to seeing oneself as a survivor. Thinking like a survivor helps you marshal the resources needed to sure up your family now and your finances over time.

¹ Keith Ablow, M.D., "The Emotional Meaning of Home," www.psychcentral.com, retrieved on Dec. 12, 2018.

When I first read this, it dawned on me how commonly we interchange the words “house” and “home”, even though they convey entirely different things. Ablow was making an important point: the loss of a “house” doesn’t necessarily mean one is without a “home.” A *house* is vitally important—yes, but it can be replaced, whereas, a *home* is when people live together and build their lives in relation to each other—where affection and ties are formed and developed. A house will often be the physical manifestation, but a home is the spirit and culture created by a household. This distinction is important to note because the common yearning for “home” is something quite different than a desire to return to a place where you once lived.

“A yearning for home” means to recreate the experience and sensation of a particular time when you shared a life with others where you were interdependent, mutually mindful and caring for each other, and you experienced significant and meaningful moments in your lives. This isn’t limited to one’s upbringing; it may occur with friends, colleagues, and neighbors (or a church family and the like) at any age or stage of life, though it normally occurs with members of one’s own family. That’s why we can return to where we lived earlier in life but not sense the feeling of it being home without the people present who made it such. It’s the ones you love that made it feel like home.

This became abundantly clear to me a couple of years ago when Wendy and I drove through Maine to the places where I once lived. It had been years since I’d been back and very little of it remained the same. In Milo, most of the downtown district had been gutted by a fire a few years ago, leaving empty lots and little new construction in its place. In Bangor, our family house had been torn down decades ago and made into a parking

lot. Likewise, the old 19th-century three-story elementary school I attended had been razed and replaced by a sprawling single-story building and gymnasium. Very little matched my mental images of when it was “home”.

Yet, as I thought about it, the memory was what made it home to me, not the physical representation of it. In my mind, it was being with my school friends, or the recollection of times playing pickup games of baseball with my brothers in the church parking lot or sneaking up into the attic to look out upon the city below, where in the distance I could view the Christmas lights dazzling the façade of Freeze’s Department Store. The memories of being in the company of family, some who are no longer living, provoked the sense that I was returning home, at least in my imagination. I realized, that it’s only in my memory where I can return home, for the place where it all took place no longer exists in the way I remember it.

“Home,” in many ways, is what each of us remember about the places we were in at particular stages in life, which I suppose is why half of the word “home” consists of “me.” “Home”, as a word or a living concept, is what we personally recall and isn’t complete without “-me”.

Frankly, that’s the essence of a yearning for home. The need is very personal and the perception of “home” is fundamentally subjective, which is why people from the same family or living environment will often convey contrasting impressions of it. We remember the past through our own subjective recall and perceptual lenses and biases. The emotions associated with family stories or any assessment of the past will frequently range across a spectrum (especially among siblings), largely because no two individuals experience situations or circumstances in exactly the same way. Where one family member might recall laughter and lightheartedness, another will hold darker thoughts of pain or shame. Where one feels

unconditional love, another might sense parental judgment and disappointment. This reflects the complicated nature of people and family cultures that bring out the best and worst elements within us. Reality in most homes is a mix of tensions and graces. For some, the yearning for home will be to recover the innocent delight and happiness of their childhood, while for another, heading home is a dreaded obligation that emotionally drains them. Going home isn't always that easy.

I think the same thing holds true in the biblical story. Many of the Advent texts are from prophets who wrote in the context of Israel's exile in Babylon (what we might call a "homeless" condition), where a yearning for home was invariably a mixed bag. Our text today from Zephaniah, like others from Advent, expresses the deep longing of Judeans to find their way back to Jerusalem someday to rebuild their nation and their lives as a people, even though (as it does for many families) it meant unmasking and addressing the sins and corruption of their "family" culture which precipitated their fracture and fall. Zephaniah's proclamation (of which we're only reading the tail end) is a combination of joy and rage, of sadness and hope, of expectation and disappointment, even with the yearning to return home to Jerusalem. They longed for their homeland, but it wouldn't be an easy return because everything changed—the dreams of the past were more appealing than the stark reality of what "home" would be once they arrived. The city walls and buildings were in ruins, the important institutions and leaders were gone, and the familiar people were no longer there in their customary places. Home would be nothing like what it had once been, at least as recalled by the elders who still lamented their sins and losses in exile. Returning to Jerusalem someday would not be like returning to a familiar, comforting place; it would mean starting over.

Forget reconstructing the past; all they could do was build a new Jerusalem based on what the lessons they learned from their history.

I suppose that's characteristic of any return. When we face the reality of what is, not what we want it to be, then there's really no past to return to. It's possible, the "home" we think we remember may never have existed at all; minimally, it will be different today compared to the past, as many of the participants who made it what it was are no longer there. A stepparent isn't the same as a parent. Siblings may not be as transparent and easy to get along with as when they were children. The past is not something that can be recreated because those who were once a part of it are not the same. The home yearned for might only be real within one's memories; or, more to the point, it may only provide an incentive to create the home one actually longs for, if there is enough time and investment in the relationships that currently exist.

A yearning for home doesn't have to mean pining for the past; instead, it could well mean envisioning a homelife that is yet to be fulfilled and experienced. The home we yearn for may be, in fact, the home to which we aspire, not what we remember, as it was for those living in exile:

Fear not...let not your hands hang limp in despair,
For YHWH your God is in your midst...to keep you safe;
Who will rejoice over you and be glad of it,
Who will show you love once more,
And exalt with songs of joy
And soothe those who are grieving...
I will gather you and bring you home.

Regardless of what the landscape of life looks like for any of us, despite what home might appear to be or not be, the home we yearn for may well be something that has yet to be created and realized with the people who surround us. Home is where your love will lead you.

As we make our way through the month of December and carry out our plans for this holiday, as we share the days with those we love (and even with those we are learning how to love), may we discover what home is and where we find it in the company we keep. In the conversations, laughter, tears, awkward relationships and moments, and sharing of life together in this season, perhaps our primary joy will be in simply grasping what we value most and then covet those things, while embracing the ones who share it with us. For a safe place to be is where we can experience the power of love and grace which allows us to move from a past that will always be a part of us, but cannot define us, as it should not replace what we will yet be in the time that still lies before us.

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16 December 2018