

Home is Where You Are

-In the year 2000, Tracey Elizabeth Huff was carried away by powers beyond her control from the cool rain of Seattle, Washington, to the blazing far country of Texas. Tracey had lived all her life in Montana, Alaska and Washington. But by the wind of the Spirit, she had been coaxed to attend Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. She did hesitate. She had shaken off the attentions of her brother, Jason's, friend Dan once before. And now she demanded the assurance of those close to her. 'You don't think that if I go to Texas, God will make me marry Dan Cravy, do you?' They assured Tracey that a *good* God would do no such thing. But just to be sure, even before the U-haul was packed for the long drive south, she put her friend Cindy on notice. She wasn't to *wonder* about Dan Cravy. She wasn't to *inquire* about Dan Cravy. She wasn't even to *pray* about the possibility of Tracey's dating Dan Cravy. (We now have it under good authority that this was because all who were wise were harboring hope for what was clearly God's best.)

As Tracey arrived in Austin, she looked to the horizon. There wasn't a mountain in sight. And when she and her parents pulled up to her apartment to begin unloading furniture, she found herself in a record heat wave that would crescendo to 112 degrees, the hottest in the history of central Texas. Not only that. The people around her were all 'TAWkin' funny.' And this is when Tracey recognized the gravity of her mistake. She let her parents know (in no uncertain terms) that they were to have that U-haul back in the same parking space on the day of her graduation three years later. She intended to trust God's calling to this desert. So she would take classes and participate in the worship life of the seminary. She would write papers and prepare for ministry and shelter in the air conditioning when necessary. But then she wanted out of this God-forsaken place.

-Our Scripture passage for today is written for a people far from home. You know the story of how God's people were conquered and taken captive by the Babylonian empire. How in exile their hearts were broken with grief for what they had lost and what they longed for. And how their disorientation and dislocation stir us to consider our own. When so many of the people were captured and marched away, the prophet Jeremiah was left behind in Jerusalem. He had been a witness to the tragic disruption of war. But charged with declaring God's word to Israel, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the people taken captive to Babylon. He sent them God's word of encouragement, his own expression of Isaiah's promise of light breaking into the darkness.

Jeremiah 29.11 is one of best loved passages in Scripture – hope for those who find themselves in dispiriting circumstances far from where they would wish to be: 'For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.' But here's the thing. Jeremiah offers this word of encouragement after acknowledging they will have to remain in exile for 70 more years! He offers instruction on how to live a fulfilling life together while they wait for rescue and return. And I think it's this reality – the reality of how God invites them people to live in disappointing circumstances – that makes Jeremiah's call to hope even more powerful.

As we enter the season of Advent, *what will it mean for us who find ourselves so far away from where we hoped to be to live with hope right here and now.*

[Read Jeremiah 29:1-2, 4-7, 10-14; Prayer]

29 These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

-In a land without mountains, Tracey couldn't bear to lose her Washington license plates. She couldn't bring herself to get a Texas driver's license or change her voter registration. She had a hard time believing that the accents she was hearing weren't some kind of charade. The heat and humidity were overwhelming all the way through Halloween. She couldn't believe people would congregate in a place where they couldn't open their windows at night. Or where the water tasted of sulphur. The seminary seemed to practice a strange brand of faith far removed from her home church experience. Texas flags and paraphernalia were ubiquitous. Every commercial trumpeted trucks that were 'Texas tough' or service that was 'Texas friendly.' What finally just about did Tracey in was the day she went to a grocery store and discovered blocks of cheese in the shape of the great state of Texas.

I wonder if we don't feel some homesickness even now for the familiarity of life before Covid. Life before certain changes and losses. For Tracey things got worse before they got better. By the end of her first year she built a strong friendship with the seminary chaplain and his wife, David and Carol Miles and their young boys. She planned to serve in an internship with David as he transitioned to pastor a local congregation. But then one night there was a tragic crash. David and his father were killed when a young driver fell asleep and struck their vehicle. The grief was a crushing weight of loss falling upon a weight of homesickness.

Tracey withdrew. She hardened herself for survival. She wanted to go back to what was familiar, go back to her friends and family and church community the way things had been.

-So did the people exiled in Babylon. They were in anguish, there against their will. And they

wanted out. But when the Lord sends them a word of hope, it's not "Get ready for rescue. Keep your boxes taped up for the return trip."

No. Jeremiah's letter suggests a different kind of hope. The Word of the Lord instructs the exiles to invest themselves in Babylon: "It's time to change your license plates. Time to unpack your boxes. It's time to get to know your neighbors. To put down roots. To pursue relationships. To raise some children. To take an interest in the common good. While you wait."

-Our own culture tells us we're entitled to our happiness right now. That we deserve better. That if our relationships are causing us pain, we should cut them off. That if our work is causing us pain, the grass is greener around the bend. That we should be ready to punch out, move on, escape our discomfort. And since things aren't quite right, since we're most likely not going to be here very long, anyway, why get to know our neighbors? Why volunteer under the bridge? Why host a party? Why plant seeds, or coach basketball, or sign up to lead?

But our flight from entangling commitments can leave us rootless and disconnected. Even more homesick for a happiness that keeps slipping through our fingers.

-The truth is that **we're not many of us in just the place we'd like to be**—if not as a matter of geography, as a matter of circumstances. We feel exiled in this marriage. Exiled in this financial situation. Exiled in this loneliness. Exiled in this hurting body. Exiled in this complexity of grief that we think no one would understand.

-And God's Word to all who are in exile is this: "Don't *wait* until the Lord rescues you from disappointment to live this day. Invest yourself where you *are*. Seek the welfare of the city to which you've been exiled. That is, seek its shalom or wholeness. Pray to the Lord on its behalf. In its welfare you will find your welfare." According to the Lord, We may be in Babylon for a long time, but how long we remain in exile is a matter of the heart.

The hope for the exiles of Babylon was that God's kingdom was coming. The hope for us exiles is that God's kingdom is coming. We may live for a lifetime waiting. But this homesick place, this city where we live, given some personal investment may become the very wellspring of a future with hope.

-Pastor Earl Palmer used to say that followers of Christ are meant to treat the place we live as if we're going to live there forever. As the particular place we've been called to be the light of Christ. We're meant to put down roots in that place. We're meant to pray for that place. We're meant to get involved in its problems. We're meant to commit ourselves to the people there and come to depend on them. Then, if God should ever call us to move on, the sign that we have truly *lived* there and not misspent our days will be our tears. Tears. Because our heartbrokenness will mean we have allowed ourselves to *love*. And our hope is intimately connected with love.

-Bebo Norman wrote a song called *Where You Are*. It's a love song for a woman for whom he is homesick. The refrain is achingly reflective and beautiful: *Home is where you are*. Home is where you are. In light of our Scripture, I hear it with double meaning. It captures both the homesickness and hope of this passage. First as an anguished line of longing, from our broken

circumstances, from our homesick exile, to God: home is where you are. I want to be with you.

Then as a line of encouragement from God to us in our place of exile: home, my children, is where you are. Right where you are. Because there is no *true* exile. There is no place apart from God. Because right here, in *this* very place, in these very circumstances, far from where you might hope to be, is where God is.

We pray this when we take Psalm 139 on our lips: If I ascend to the heavens, you are there. If I descend to the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest point of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand will hold me fast.

God is good. God is in control. God's final rescue will come. *And* God is where you are. His present plan for our future good calls for living in, praying for, and seeking the welfare of others here and now.

The 'welfare' God promises us in the 'welfare' of the city to which we have been given comes from the Hebrew word *shalom*. It has the sense of a wellness, wholeness, flourishing and delight that brings personal and communal peace. The promise here is that the wholeness we hurt for is found in pursuing wholeness as stewards of all God has made.

-It turns out the prophet Jeremiah himself became a symbol of this kind of hope. Even while the city of Jerusalem was under siege and the surrounding lands laid to waste, God called him to do something odd. To purchase a field. That is: To exchange money. To have a deed drawn up, signed, sealed, witnessed and registered. To demonstrate confidence in a future when fields would again gain value. When the exiles would return home. Jeremiah was called to embody the hope of God's people. And so are we.

This is the Christian hope. The hope of Advent. It's a trust in God's promised future that we bank on and buy into in the present. We are waiting for the final coming of Christ and his kingdom, where all who are homesick will find their home. And while we wait for that day, we buy this war-torn field, right here. We invest ourselves in the healing and wholeness of others. We take steps toward the way things should be, not only personally, but as a community of Christ-centered faith. We love God and love neighbor. On purpose. Right where we are.

-Are you buying fields even while under siege? Are you living with that kind of active hope in your present circumstances?

Are you seeking the welfare (the shalom wholeness and flourishing) of the community and circumstances to which you have been given?

of your family?....
of your high school or college?...
of your marriage or singleness?...
of your health situation?...
of your grief?...
of your work or retirement?

of your city?
of your church?

- Looking through the lens of mystery for how God weaves the frayed threads of our suffering for redemptive beauty, we can now see how the loss of Tracey's friend led her to an internship on the ministry staff at the church where I was serving as a youth pastor. We can see how her heartbroken homesickness led to a deepening need for me, who was already a friend from home. Tracey began to plant roots in the Texas hill country that she might not have expected. Shared ministry. Friendships. Renewed laughter. Upon her graduation three years after she arrived, Tracey's parents returned with the U-haul as promised. But it was only to move her belongings a few miles across Austin to the townhouse of her husband. / One of the songs I played for her when we became engaged was 'Home is Where You Are.'

To be honest, my family has often been a better illustration of stubborn homesickness than of buying a field of hope from which what God will do to redeem. But over these years we Cravys have also experienced God's faithfulness to bring wholeness and flourishing to unexpected places that once felt far from where we wanted to be.

In the course of her five years in Texas, Tracey found herself moving in, planting seeds, blooming where she was planted, and coming to love these people and this place that had at first represented exile. She did make me take my horse, my windmill, and my Texas star off the fireplace mantle when we got married. But my Texas family became her Texas family. And when it was time to say goodbye, we both shed tears – now leaving home for a next land of exile-become-home in Missoula, Montana.

-Friends, in what ways do you feel far from home? Far from the place or circumstances in which you'd long to be?

What if Jeremiah's letter was somehow written for you? Somehow read for you today? 'Surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for harm, to give you a future with hope....Seek the shalom of the city to which you've been exiled. Pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its wholeness and flourishing, you will find your own.'

The words we have to pray are: Home is where You are, Lord.
And the word we hear today is: Home is where you are. //Amen.