

December 17, 2023

**The Visions of Zechariah**  
**III. Home for Christmas**  
**Zechariah 10:6-12**

Dr. William P. Seel  
Easley Presbyterian Church  
Easley, South Carolina

December 1943 was a difficult and dark time in the annals of world history – the middle of World War II. Even here in America the days were fraught with uncertainty and anxiety. The outcome of the great war was still somewhat an unknown, as Allied advances in North Africa, Italy, and the Gilbert Islands had proved much more difficult and much more costly than expected. The war, for America, was now coming to the end of its second full year. And as the familiar Christmas carols began to fill the air, longing for loved ones serving far from home began to fill many hearts across our land.

But nowhere was that longing more keenly felt than in the hearts of those young men and women overseas in our nation's armed forces. Early in November of 1943, Decca Records released a song that, in a few short verses, captured that longing almost perfectly. The song quickly rose up the charts and stayed there for weeks even after Christmas. Everywhere, at home and abroad, one could hear this song playing over and over – over and over Bing Crosby capturing the mood of that moment as he wistfully crooned:

*I'll be home for Christmas,  
You can plan on me.  
Please have snow and mistletoe  
And presents on the tree.*

*Christmas Eve will find me  
Where the lovelight gleams.  
I'll be home for Christmas,  
If only in my dreams.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The very idea of home exercises such a powerful pull on our hearts, doesn't it? The longing for home is something deep-writ upon the human heart. And even the imperfect realities of the actual homes we live in, the imperfect realities of our life in families – even when, at the extreme, our actual homes are as much a source of hurt as for heart-warming – still that longing for home abides in us. That longing for an ideal home where all is calm and all is bright, and love is patient and kind.

Perhaps it is a longing that is imprinted on us in childhood – something that is coded into us by our earliest experiences of being so dependent upon those in our homes. I heard of a workshop in which participants were invited to draw out the floor plan of the earliest childhood home they could remember. Amazingly detailed drawings then came forth from out of the mists of childhood memories. But as much as our longing for home may be imprinted on us by childhood, I suspect that the real reason we cling so tightly to our dream of home is because this longing has actually been inscribed upon our souls by our Creator. He is the One who has placed in us this longing for home. He is the One who is most longing for us to come home.

What the Bible tells us is that once upon a time we had the perfect home. But in a fit of foolishness and rebellion we threw it away. We stormed out the door and vowed never to come back again. We shouted over our shoulders, as we went, those terrible words, *“I don’t need you anymore.”* You see, God was our home, once upon a time – and the Garden of Eden was the floor plan in which we once lived. And, in sin, we threw it away.<sup>1</sup> And we’ve been feeling rather homesick, even homeless, ever since. In our deepest moments, in our quieter hours, in our times of vulnerability, we sense this, we know this about ourselves. Frederick Buechner once wrote that, *“to be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them.”*<sup>2</sup> But the Psalmist said it best:

*O God, you are my God;  
earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and dusty land  
where there is no water.*<sup>3</sup>

That is what our longing for home is really all about. And that is why even if our actual homes and our actual families all suddenly became perfect this Christmas, a Norman Rockwell painting come to life, still we would find ourselves longing for something even more than that. Because what we are really longing for is the home we lost when we turned away from God. What we are really longing for is something our earthly homes and our earthly families, even at their best, can never provide for us. What we are really longing for is to be able to go back to our one true home – to God, who is our one true home. God has put this longing into our hearts so that we will not rest our lives in anything else, but will eventually come to our senses like prodigal sons and daughters and come back home to Him. But how do we find it, our one true home? In a world filled with so many dead-ends and bad directions, how do we find home? How do we find Him?

\* \* \* \* \*

Zechariah is prophesying to a people who were lost and very far from home. A little Biblical history: after King Solomon, Israel had split into two separate nations – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Most of the prophets in the Bible are speaking to Judah, where Jerusalem lay. They are speaking to Judah because Israel, the northern kingdom of God’s people, no longer existed. In 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire had conquered Israel. Even more devastating, they had taken the population of Israel and resettled them in other parts of the Assyrian Empire – scattered them, in other words, all across the known world.<sup>4</sup> And so, by the time of Zechariah,

some three hundred years later, their homeland must have seemed a distant dream to these scattered Israelites – if they remembered it at all. And if they remembered their God at all.

Which is what makes our passage this morning so amazing. As I said, most often the prophets address Judah, the southern kingdom, which was still in existence. But in our passage this morning, Zechariah reveals something incredible that God intends to do for all His people – including the lost people of the northern kingdom, Israel. The prophetic word is this: “*I will strengthen the house of Judah*” – the southern kingdom, including Jerusalem; “*and I will save the house of Joseph*” – the northern kingdom, Israel, scattered over all the known world.

*I will bring them back because I have compassion on them,  
and they shall be as though I had not rejected them . . .  
I will whistle for them and gather them in,  
for I have redeemed them,  
and they shall be as many as they were before.  
Though I scattered them among the nations,  
yet in far countries they shall remember me,  
and with their children they shall live and return.  
I will bring them home . . .*

The Lord is going to bring Israel home again – to that home they had lost and given up ever finding again. God is going to gather all His people, Israel and Judah both, and make them one people again, make them His people again, make them home again.

And thus that ancient prophecy speaks to us this morning about what Christmas really is all about. Christmas is exactly what Zechariah foretold: God making a way for all His lost children, for all His prodigal sons and daughters – more than that: God making a way for all the world and all of us to come back home to Him. To Him, who is our one true Home. Christmas is God whistling to all His lost children that it is time to come in. Christmas is God in Christ gathering all His children to Himself. Christmas is God making it possible, at last, for all of us to come home – to our one true Home – to come home for Christmas. In the words of the old spiritual:

*Don't be weary, traveller;  
Come along home to Jesus;  
Don't be weary, traveller;  
Come along home to Jesus.*

*Where to go I did not know  
Come along home to Jesus;  
[But] Ever since he freed my soul,  
Come along home to Jesus.<sup>5</sup>*

Christmas is God making a way for us to come home – home to Him, who is our one true Home.

But, you know what – it's even more than that. Christmas is even more than God making a way for all of us sinners to come home to the One who is our true Home – everything forgiven,

the fatted calf prepared for the feast, rings on our fingers and our Father's best robe upon our shoulders.<sup>6</sup> Christmas is even more than that – and it is this “even more” which reveals to us the true depth of our Heavenly Father's love for us.

On Christmas night, Mary and Joseph were journeying home because of Caesar's decree – or at least to Joseph's ancestral home, a little village called Bethlehem. When they arrived, Mary gave birth to her first-born child, wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger. A star shone brightly in the night sky, a heavenly host appeared and sang, “*Glory to God in the highest!*,” shepherds came and saw that what the angel had told them was really true.<sup>7</sup>

But what that birth meant was not just that God was making a way for His people to come home – something this Holy Child would indeed accomplish through His death and resurrection. No, what that birth also meant was that God came into this world to show us how much He desired for us to come home to Him. What that birth also meant was this: that, to a world of homesick souls, to a world of longing hearts and restless spirits, to a world of exiles on the verge of giving up all hopes of home – to such a world as this, and to people such as you and me, what Christmas also meant is that our one true Home had come into this world to find us. God in the flesh, Immanuel, that child in the manger – we want to find Home, but the great good news of Christmas is how much our Home wants to find us. And came into this world to do just that. Like a shepherd searching for His lost sheep, a woman turning the house upside-down to find her lost coin, like a father running down the road to welcome home his prodigal son.<sup>8</sup>

And having found us here, in this world, in this life – do you remember what He told us about the next? Of how He was going to go back to His Father's House in order to prepare a place for us to be at home with Him forever!<sup>9</sup> Jesus Christ at Christmas not only opens the way for us to find our way home to Him, Jesus Christ is also our one true Home come into this world to find us! That's the deeper miracle, and the deeper promise, and the deeper joy we celebrate this Christmastide. Our one true Home – the One we are so desperately trying to find – came into this world to find us.

But what shall we say all of this means for us, in this last week of Advent, this last week before Christmas comes? I don't think I can say it any better than Henri Nouwen – so let me quote from his wonderful meditation on Rembrandt's painting of the return of the prodigal son:

*It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God. Yes, God needs me as much as I need God. God is not the patriarch who stays home, doesn't move, and expects his children to come to him, apologize for their aberrant behavior, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. To the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his dignity by running toward them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.*

*I am beginning now to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find him,*

*but, instead, as the one who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding . . .*

*Wouldn't it be good to increase God's joy by letting God find me and carry me home and celebrate my return with the angels? Wouldn't it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly?<sup>10</sup>*

That's what it means for us that in Jesus, at Christmas, God not only made it possible for us to again find our way to our one true home in Him, but also that God, our one true home, came into this world to find us. That's what it means – this invitation of Advent, this gift of Christmas, this wonderful good news of the Gospel about just how deeply and completely and undeservedly and unconditionally we are loved by God. It means that we truly can, as old Bing sang, be home for Christmas this year. In fact, wouldn't it be wonderful if all of God's children were to come home this Christmas – home to the One who is our one true home?

*I will bring them back because I have compassion on them,  
and they shall be as though I had not rejected them . . .  
I will whistle for them and gather them in,  
for I have redeemed them,  
and they shall be as many as they were before.  
Though I scattered them among the nations,  
yet in far countries they shall remember me,  
and with their children they shall live and return.  
I will bring them home . . .*

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:1-24.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, The Longing for Home (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 63:1.

<sup>4</sup> See II Kings 17, especially v. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Nathaniel Dett, "Don't Be Weary Traveler." To hear this spiritual: [Don't Be Weary, Traveler \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:1-20.

<sup>8</sup> The three parables of Luke 15.

<sup>9</sup> John 14:2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 100-101.