



The Old Homeplace

TEXT
Psalm 137:1-6

December 1, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Last Sunday, I was with 18 other folks from our Village family on a trip to the Dominican Republic. For close to 30 years, the Dominican Republic Medical Partnership has been a vital ministry of this congregation, and I was so excited to finally be able to see our work there.

I was less excited when Lora Garrison, our Director of International Mission, told me that we would meet at the airport at 4:15 a.m. I don't think God is awake at 4:15! I dragged myself there, and by 4:15 in the afternoon, we were in the Dominican Republic. If you have taken a trip like this, you know that pretty soon you realize that you are not at home anymore. First of all, our hosts told us it was winter. It was hot. I said, "You don't know winter. I come from Kansas, the tundra; I can tell you about winter."

And it seems like everyone in the D.R. travels by small motorcycles that make a lot of noise — all night long. If Santa brings you a white noise sleep machine that sounds like motorcycles riding around your bedroom, you might think you are in the D.R. And you probably know this already, but in the D.R. they

speak Spanish, and they speak it very quickly.

I speak Spanish also, but with a limited vocabulary. By limited, I mean I know *gracias*, *adios* and *taco*. So, unless I'm in a situation where I need to say, "Thanks for the taco, I gotta go," I'm less than fluent. Most disappointing, I never saw anyone eating a taco, effectively reducing my vocabulary by a third. It was clear to me, I was not at home. That may be the most important spiritual lesson I learned this week. I'm not at home. And coming back to the States didn't change that.

It's Advent, and one way to think of this season is that Advent reminds us we are not home. To say it differently, Advent reminds us what being home would look like. When we realize what home is really like, we recognize that we aren't there yet.

Psalm 137 is a psalm from exile. Do you remember exile? It was one of the most formative experiences in Judaism. The kingdom of Babylon overthrew Jerusalem and marched the leaders of Israel back to Babylon. It is a psalm of grief.

By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept. They weep because they aren't home

anymore. They have been ripped from the old home place, and it breaks their hearts. So, they remember. *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, O Jerusalem.* They are homesick.

I remember sitting on the porch of Westfield dining hall. It was my first summer camp. Do you remember summer camp? There was a store where I could get a coke and M&M's; just put it on my tab. Camp had archery, canoeing and swimming. I made a lanyard out of those nylon strings. I still don't know what a lanyard is for.

I had looked forward to summer camp. But when I got to summer camp, I discovered something that was not in the brochure: I was homesick. I was "crying-in-your-pillow-at-night" homesick. There wasn't much that helped. I didn't care that there was ice cream with dinner every night. I didn't care that we made a wallet in Arts and Crafts. I didn't even sing the songs around the campfire: *If I Had a Hammer* and *Do Your Ears Hang Low?* (which may be the dumbest song in the history of music!) The only thing that mattered was home.

That's Psalm 137: *By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept.* They are homesick. But here's the thing. Home is not someplace we used to be. We aren't trying to get home again. The truth is, we have never been home. Not yet.

The season of Advent is not simply preparation for Christmas. Advent is a reminder that we are not home. The home for us all is a day we have yet to know. But it is a time we can trust — because now and then, God gives us glimpses of home. It is those glimpses that make us homesick, which is actually a good thing. We are longing for home.

I was reminded of that this week. We were visiting in a Batey La Cejas. Most folks who live in the bateys work cutting sugar cane. It's back-breaking work with sharecropper's wages — a few dollars per harvested ton, we were told. We were in the batey providing some basic health-care support: eyeglasses and toothbrushes and some blood pressure medications.

While there, I saw a beautiful air-conditioned tour bus pull up and unload a group of sun-glassed, camera-wearing tourists from Europe. They had come from the resort Casa de Campo — maybe you have been there. They came on a tour of the batey. Like visiting the zoo, they snapped photos of the poverty. They tossed candy to the children, raised their eyebrows at the squalid conditions and got back on the bus. They probably talked about how these folks

lacked the drive and discipline to advance themselves.

I wonder if they realized that the children they threw their candy at were angels from God, holy messengers declaring that none of us are home yet. Being able to ride an air-conditioned bus doesn't mean you are home. Maybe they did; I don't know. But I heard it, because I know about Advent.

There are a lot of voices that say the world, as it is, is good enough. But Christianity says we are not home until all that has gone wrong in us and in the world is made right. The only faithful posture for us to take in the meantime is to yearn for home, to grieve that we are not there, and not forget what our real home looks like. But home is not something we go back to; we are looking forward for home.

When we get worship right, we remind ourselves what home looks like. We are practicing the life that God intends for us. We don't get it perfect, but without it, we might forget what we are looking for, and mistakenly assume we have already found home. Sometimes we get a glimpse of the promised day God intends.

So, our daughter Sarah is visiting for Thanksgiving. Whenever she is with us, that girl keeps her mother and I laughing. She is one funny woman. She has always made me laugh.

I remember when, as a child, she discovered humor. She learned about jokes. She would tell "knock knock" jokes and

just laugh. Her favorites were the "why ... because" jokes. You know, "Why do you put birthday candles on top of a cake?"

"Because it's too hard to put them on the bottom." Oh, she would just fall over herself laughing.

And there was a season when both she and Nathan would tell jokes every morning as I was preparing their breakfast. They learned the rhythm of "why ... because" jokes, but not the content. So, they would say, "Why did the cat go to school?"

"Because it's raining outside." They would fall apart laughing.

"Why did the sun shine?"

"Because it's Monday." Oh, they were so funny.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was getting a glimpse of a day that was coming, a day when laughter would ring out and joy would fill the air.

Faith lives on glimpses. I don't know that we ever get more than that, but we do get glimpses of what God is doing among us and what God intends for us. I got a glimpse on Tuesday.

That tour bus of comfort pulled away, and a woman old enough to be my mother walked down to the church where some folks from Village greeted her — not with cameras, but with grace. Linda talked to her about how to take care of her feet. Not everyone in the bateys has shoes, and life is hard on their feet.

And then Linda lifted this woman's feet into Linda's lap. She washed them. There was

a whole row of folks doing the same: Lauren and Lindsey, Emma and Andrea were doing the same. She massaged her weary feet. And as I watched our friends massage the feet of these beautiful people whom the world has tried to break and then forget, I was overwhelmed with the kindness of it; the respect. It was one of the clearest moments in my life when I could tell Jesus was in the room — for Linda looked just like Jesus to me. And I got a glimpse of what home will look like.

We are not home yet. Sometimes it seems so far away it makes you weep. But even with tear-filled eyes, pay attention — for God will give you a glimpse of home. That glimpse will make you homesick. It will make you long for the day when everyone is home. Another word for that holy homesickness is *hope*.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.