

December 3, 2023
Advent 1: Stay Awhile Series: Invite
Jeremiah 33:14-16

Scripture

Our text this morning is the fourth of seven oracles in chapter 33 of Jeremiah, in which the author uses God's own voice to remind the people of God's promises and God's intention to keep those promises. In a way, this chapter collects and lists all the ways Israel voices hope for the future. This particular promise is the promise of a king who will do what kings are supposed to do: practice justice and righteousness.

This is Jeremiah 33: 14-16.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time, I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." (NRSV)

Most of you know that part of my daily routine is time at the dog park with Porter. We have a little play group we meet there. The dogs run and wrestle and play, and the people chat about the weather and what's for dinner and whatever cute things our dogs have done since yesterday. We spend anywhere between one and two hours there, depending on the weather and schedules. When it's time to go, I say, "Porter, let's go home." As soon as I do, he runs for the gate. It's adorable.

Thursday, when we were at the park, it was wet and chilly. So, nobody was happier than I was to announce that it was time to go home. As usual, Porter took off for the gate. As I watched him run, I wondered, "What does home mean to him?" When I say home, does he picture our house? Is home to him his next meal? His bed? The couch? Our backyard? Or is it wherever we, his people, are? There's a part of me that hopes it's all those things. I hope when I say, "Let's go home," he thinks of our house with all the creature comforts, his food and toys, and people who love him. I hope he knows it's his forever place.

What is home to you? As I contemplated this question for myself, I thought of a few things that make me feel at home. I like a fire in the fireplace. I like home to smell seasonally appropriate...pumpkin spice in the fall, Christmas tree-like now, and coconut/beachy in the summer. You get the idea. And this time of year, especially, part of home is hot beverages...coffee with half and half, tea with a little honey, or hot cocoa, hold the marshmallows. Home smells a certain way and feels a certain way, doesn't it?

NPR journalist Jon Hamilton reported a few years ago that researchers have found that the concept of home is deeply embedded in human beings. Sleep studies have shown that half of the brain doesn't enter REM sleep the first night or two that we sleep in a new place. From an evolutionary standpoint, when we sleep in a new place, half of our brain stays alert, wondering, 'Is there a bear in this new cave with me? Will a rodent burrow into my brain and make a nest?'¹ Based on this research, I decided there must be more to the idea of home than how a place smells and what we drink while there.

In her book *Stay Awhile: Divine Lessons in Hospitality*, Rev. Kara Eidson, digs a little deeper into what home ought to be. She writes that home is: "...a place where we can be completely and authentically ourselves and where we always know that we will be safe and loved. A place where we can heal and rest from the weariness of the world that has the tendency to wear and weigh us down despite its infinite amount of beauty."²

If I am reading Eidson correctly, this means it is possible for a place to feel like home, even if it's not the place we live. And conversely, it is possible for the place we live not to feel like home. I can think of examples of both. My grandma's house felt like home when I was a child. My office here at the church feels like home, especially now with my silver aluminum tree standing in the corner. So many young people in the LGBTQ+ community don't feel at home in the place they live. They don't feel safe to be who they were created to be. So, home is less about where we live and more about how we feel when we are there. It makes sense then that hospitality is simply about making people feel like they are at home. It is simple...and it's not.

Specific acts of hospitality are received differently by each of us. I thought of a couple of examples of that from a church perspective this week. First, the "passing of the peace" in worship. I don't know who initially came up with the idea: Let's make people feel welcome by stopping worship and insisting that people greet the people sitting around them. Visitors hate that; some members do, too. There are people who just want to walk into worship, sit down, and be. The most hospitable thing we can do is say hello and make sure they know where the restroom is. It is difficult to know who wants to be left alone and who wants to strike up a conversation. We mess it up sometimes. But we also get it right sometimes.

Second, you may have noticed that nametags are available in the Fellowship Hall this morning. We've received some feedback that it's hard to learn each other's names if we don't have them. And calling people by name is hospitable. Some of you will love the nametags. Others will hate them; likely, this is the same group that really just

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/21/474691141/half-your-brain-stands-guard-when-sleeping-in-a-new-place>, accessed 12/1/23.

² Eidson, Kara, *Stay Awhile: Advent Lessons in Divine Hospitality*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY: 2023, 2.

wants to be left alone. I wonder if wearing the nametags for a while could be a way of being hospitable to one another, even for those of us who don't enjoy wearing them. You may have noticed that members of the staff wear their nametags regularly. Being called by name goes a long way in helping people feel like they are safe, seen, and like they belong. It makes us feel like we are home.

The text I read this morning from the book of Jeremiah was written to address people who were not at home. It speaks to one of the defining memories of the Jewish people: their 70-year exile in Babylon. Jeremiah, who was known not to mince words or sugarcoat the ways in which God's people had strayed from God, in this text communicated God's word to them in a way that made faith seem possible even amid their biggest crisis. He gives the exiles hope.

The prophet was uniquely situated to speak these bold words because of both his proximity to the events in Jerusalem and his status as something of an outsider. He lived outside of Jerusalem and was, therefore, not a power structure "insider." Yet, as the son of a priest, he had taken in the knowledge of both politics and faith his whole life.

Jeremiah's lifetime was a time of insecurity for Israel because the powerful Assyrian Empire constantly threatened to overrun them. Looking at a map of the region in that period, we can see Assyria to the north and east and Egypt to the west and south. At the time, Judah was part of an important trade route between the two, and everyone knew it was only a matter of time before their autonomy was at risk. In 586 BCE, Jerusalem was invaded, and the temple was destroyed. The Jewish people were scattered, and even the Jewish people who remained in Jerusalem were not home. They weren't safe. Their community was gone. The temple, the place in which they believed God resided, was gone.

Jeremiah became a political prisoner. It was from that hostile environment that these words of hope came. Historically, some of the most important and dangerous writings have been written from a prison cell. The authentic letters of Paul are examples of this, as are Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail and Nelson Mandela's letters from prison. What is so dangerous about hope? Hope amid devastation and desperation is an act of resistance. Hope is very dangerous to an oppressive status quo. Hope is dangerous to the ones who benefit when the people have given up. Jeremiah's words to the people were, "Don't give up. This is not the end of your story and certainly not the end of God's story."

A conquering army hasn't overrun our nation. We are not sitting in a prison cell, but I wonder if we can relate to the people who were in exile at that time and place, especially to the longing to feel at home they experienced. As I think about the war in Ukraine, which we don't hear so much about because the war in Israel and Palestine

has taken its place in the news cycle, I wonder where hope can be found for our world neighbors while guns are shot, missiles are fired, and human beings are killed. Where is hope as icebergs melt, seas and air are polluted, and politicians are celebrating an all-time high in domestic oil production? The earth is our home, and the human beings and creatures we share it with are our roommates, yet so many of us don't feel safe or like we have a place to belong. We long for home.

Psalm 137 gives us a window into this type of longing for the Babylonian exiles:

By the rivers of Babylon—

there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

³For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy...

The theme of longing for home and homecoming, a longing to be right with God and reside in the comfort of the homeland once again, is common among the exilic texts. From a historical perspective, though, we know that even after the Israelites returned home, a king from the line of David who acted right was still not a reality. And hundreds of years later, the people under the oppression of the Roman Empire still longed for someone to fix it; they longed for someone to make their home feel like home again. They longed to feel safe. They longed to matter to people who were in power. Some of the Jewish people thought Jesus was the fixer; others did not.

The day Jesus was born, the Jewish people were under the thumbs of the Romans. And the day he died, they were still oppressed. And yet, the story of his birth calls us to hope. It is hope that comes in the form of a brown-skinned baby born to parents without much money who were part of an oppressive system that would eventually kill him. But the stories of Jesus' life paint a picture of a world that feels like home for everyone...not just for the ones with war horses and weapons, not just for the ones with money or the ones with the dominant worldview or religion. The kin-dom of God Jesus talked about and revealed is a place of wholeness...a place of true shalom.

You have probably noticed that Rev. Hubbard and I use the word kin-dom instead of the word kingdom. When we talk about the kin-dom of God, we are talking about the concept of beloved community. Beloved community is interdependent, equitable, just, and peaceful. It is a place in which everyone belongs. And the stories we celebrate this season teach us that we are most likely to encounter the kin-dom of God in spaces where intentional hospitality is practiced, and where we find ourselves in spaces of love and safety.”³

Throughout this season, we will be imagining the ways in which we can extend hospitality so that this church feels like home and, by extension, so that the community of Bartlesville feels like home to all people. As I said before, hospitality begins with an invitation. So first, you are invited to participate in making this place feel like home. That looks like embracing people who look, think, and believe differently than you do. That looks like meeting doubts and questions with curiosity and love and not judgment. That looks like valuing the contributions of all people, whether they are 1 or 100, embracing the joyful noise of children and the quiet wisdom of older adults. Even the not-so-quiet wisdom. It looks like coffee, tea, cookies, gluten-free communion options, and absolutely anything else we can do to throw the doors wide open and say, “There is room for all of us here.”

And if you are looking for home, you are invited to dwell here while you figure out if this feels like home to you. You are invited to drink tea or coffee, eat cookies, and look for the hope we are promised in the kin-dom of God. And it’s okay if you aren’t sure about God. That hope is for you, too. It’s a persistent hope that has been showing up for a long time...for Babylonian exiles, for Jesus’ followers in the Roman Empire, for families experiencing their first Christmas without a loved one, for our weary neighbors who are tired of fighting about vaccinations and politics, and for the seekers of justice who are working to dismantle the oppressive systems of today. Hope is alive and you are invited to look for it, to embody it, and to dream about it. There is room for you here. Amen.

³ Eidson, Kara, 2.