

Home, Sweet Home

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home”. So says the old song; and I think we’d all agree. No matter how far you travel or how long you are away, no matter what adventures you experience and interesting sights you see, no matter which loved ones you visit and old friendships you renew, there is still a good feeling that comes over you at journey’s end when you arrive safely back at the place you call home. That’s where you are the most comfortable and at ease. And while you are away from home there is a consciousness that wherever I go I am here as a visitor. I’m someone passing through. This is not my permanent place. And while I may enjoy being here for now, my heart always feels a desire to be back where I really belong.

But now suppose you were headed for a home you’d never been to before, a place you’d never seen. Think about those settlers who crossed this continent on the Oregon trail back in the 1800s, for example, or the thousands of piteous refugees streaming out of war torn Africa and Syria who take great risks to cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded and leaky vessels with the goal of being admitted into some European country. They know from the start that they’re going to spend months, maybe years in makeshift camps and unhealthy conditions, taking on the most menial jobs in a land where they don’t understand the language or the culture. What’s driving them? Simple: it’s the hope for something better, a place where they can be at peace and live in security. They are looking for a place they can call home.

The biblical example, of course, is the Children of Israel on their forty year trek through the desert. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. After leaving Mount Sinai the Lord had brought them up to the edge of the Promised Land and said, “Go ahead. Take possession of it. I’m giving it to you.” But the Israelites were afraid. The land was already occupied by Canaanites who were strong and numerous. They had weapons and armies. They lived in fortified cities. The Israelites saw themselves as weak and outnumbered. They couldn’t imagine how they’d be able to wrest the land away from the current occupants. The Lord told them “Never you mind that. I’ll fight your battles for you. Go in and take possession of the land.” But they didn’t believe it. They didn’t trust the Lord to do what he promised. So the Lord said, “Fine. Have it your way. Since you won’t take the land, go back to the desert. Live out there, wandering from place to place as I shall lead you. And when this generation of unbelievers has died out, I’ll give the land to your children instead.

Put yourself in the sandals of someone in that next generation. You were born in the desert. It’s the only place you’ve ever seen. And all it looks pretty much the same: sand, stones, scrub brush, little patches of dry grass scattered about. You live on manna, the “bread” the Lord provides that you pick up from the ground every morning. Along with the occasional bite of quail meat, it’s the only food you’ve ever tasted. Your dwelling, such as it is, is a tent that you fold up and take with you wherever you go. You have no permanent place to call home. What you have instead is an endless succession of camps. Every couple of days you pack up everything you own, lug it a day’s journey across the desert, and set it all back up again.

And then in the evening you sit listening to the old timers talk about how it’s going to be when we finally get to enter the Promised Land. Why then you’ll have permanent, sturdy homes made of stone and timber, they say. you’ll have furniture. No more sleeping on the ground with the snakes and scorpions. There will be forests and shady groves; pastures of green grass;

fields of wheat and barley. “What?” you ask. “The food grows out of the ground, like on plants?” You’ve never seen the like of it. All you know is the desert. “Yes” they reply. “And on trees too. And on vines. Why, you’ll have oranges and pomegranates and dates; great big bunches of grapes. you’ll be able to make wine. And you’ll have melons and cucumbers, onions and garlic; all sorts fruits and vegetables. And near your homes you’ll have running streams and pools of water. you’ll be able to go for a swim. You’ll catch fish and eat them. Oh, it’s going to be grand. Just wait. You’ll see.”

The truth is that you can’t imagine any of it. It sounds like fantasy land to you; just a bunch of stories the old timers tell to entertain the younger folks. None of it can be real, can it?

Well, you know the answer. It’s all very real. Just because it lies outside the experience of those Israelites who had been born in the desert, didn’t make it less real. And it was part of their future – a future they all got to experience. Though it would have been hard for them to fully grasp the concept, they were going home; home to a place they’d never been before.

Dear friends, in much the same way we are heading home. This is what Paul is saying in today’s Epistle. He writes, “We know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house made not with hands, eternal in the heavens.” He’s speaking of the resurrection of our bodies. This body, this earthly tent for the soul, is temporary. It’s weak and frail. It’s under the curse due to our sin. It’s subject to pain and disease, the ravages of aging, and ultimately death.

But that’s not the end of it. It’s going to be raised again. It’s going to be made a permanent home for the soul: immortal, perfect, no longer under the curse and subject to its unhappy consequences. And yes, that’s hard to imagine because it lies so far outside of our experience. But that doesn’t make it any less true, any less real. We are going to be given a new home.

And we have three witnesses that testify to it. We have first the Word of the Lord who has made this promise. He cannot lie. We have secondly the resurrection of Jesus, who died for sin, once for all, and who was raised again, the first fruits of those who have fallen into the sleep of death. Because he died for all sin, the power of death over us is defeated. And because he rose, we too must rise. Thirdly we have the gift of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out upon us as a guarantee of the good things to come. It is the Spirit who works in you the gift of faith to believe the promise ... to believe the promise even while still out here in the desert, so to speak.

In this desert where life isn’t so easy; where, as Paul says, “We groan, being burdened ... longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.” He means more than just the aches, pains, and sorrows of life in this fallen world. Though that is included, he has in mind specifically the persecution and suffering we may be called upon to endure for the sake of the Gospel. It goes back to the first part of the lesson when he speaks about knowing that if this tent is destroyed, we have a better one coming. The point is this: what’s the worst thing they can do to you? Kill you? Okay. So what? It just means that you move out of the tent sooner.

Not that we should want that to happen or do things to deliberately hasten death; but rather that we shouldn’t fear it. Instead Paul says, knowing what we do, we are always of good courage. We press on the journey the Lord has laid out for us, confident that he who has better things planned for us in the future is also using the present to shape us, to discipline us, to grow us into what he wants us to become.

We walk by faith, not by sight. But the day is coming when we will see – see as we never have before with eyes made perfect, with hearts cleansed, with minds cleared of all the junk that clutters them now. And we will see such sights and experience such things that we can't even begin to image now.

And therefore, as Paul says, as we journey in this wilderness, we make it our aim to please him who has done so much to rescue us and who has promised to do for us such great things. How do we do that? Mostly by trusting him, by hearing his Word and believing what he tells us. That's how the Spirit works in us to hold fast to the faith in which we stand, and also to know and do the Lord's will, to love others as he loves us, so that, at journey's end when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ we may hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord. And welcome home." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!