

Lent3, Year C – March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Epiphany, Winnipeg

The problem with going back to where you come from is that you never know what “where you come from” really is. Or something like that.

At the tender age of twenty-one I travelled for the first time to the land that my people had left ninety or more years before. My parents had never been there. My grandparents had never been there. At least two of my great-grandparents had never been there. But I grew up knowing that most of the blood that coursed through my veins is Norwegian blood. I had eaten the special stuff we Norwegians always eat at Christmas and other times of year, I drank strong coffee, I went to a small college whose sports teams were named the Vikings, I was a good Lutheran boy, I looked like my Norwegian ancestors, and I had taken six night school classes – not entire courses, but classes, like six weeks in a row – to learn some Norwegian. I was well-equipped by my heritage and those six classes to return to the land of my ancestors, and when I stepped off the train onto Norwegian concrete my first thought and deep deep feeling was that I had come home. My second thought was that I had no idea what I was supposed to do next, because this was in fact a strange land. It was not like home. It was not where I came from. And I could never fool anyone into thinking that it was.

The problem with going back to where you come from is that you never know what “where you come from” really is. Or something like that.

Here’s what’s happening in that reading we heard from Isaiah 55 before.

The people of Israel and Judah had been forced to live away from their homeland for seventy years or so. The Babylonian army had swept in and destroyed the capital city, reduced the temple and other important buildings to rubble, knocked down the city walls, and taken a lot of the population of the land to live in a far away place called Babylon. The homeland was left broken and kind of empty. I guess it all has a familiar ring to it, doesn't it? A foreign army, buildings levelled, people forced to run for their lives or people taken captive and forced to live somewhere else. They've been far away in Babylon for seventy years now, but the prophet Isaiah writes a promise that God has spoken: a promise that their exile is over, and they will finally return home. Back to Jerusalem, back to Judah, back to the land that God had promised so long ago. Back to the land they had lost seventy years ago. They'll be home.

After seventy years of living far away from home, the people finally get to return.

But there's a small hiccup in that story, isn't there? Think about it. Most of those people going back to the old homeland have never even seen the place before, because over those seventy years since they were taken away two or three or four generations have died. Two or three or four new generations have been born in Babylon and it's the only home they have ever known. And now Isaiah writes them a poem and says, more or less, "You're going back. You're leaving everything you've ever known, and going somewhere that you've never seen. Isn't that great?" You can't help but think that a lot of those people might rather stay where they are. "I grew up in Babylon, I know how things work here, I speak the language, I can find my way around the market, I live life the way life is

lived in Babylon. I don't want to go and rebuild a place that I've never seen." And even the ones who have known the old country, or the ones who have heard the stories and think that they know what it's like back there? Maybe they'll step off the train, like a twenty-one year old Norwegian boy a few millenia later - onto the ancestral soil and see that it's not what it used to be, or it's not what all those stories made it out to be, and it's not quite home after all.

But the promise to the people is never that they're going back to the life they knew before. The promise is that they are leaving behind captivity, they are leaving behind exile, and wherever they go God will be meeting them with a promise that they will have all the food, and milk, and drink, and bread and life that they will ever need. They will always always always be loved by God, whose kindness is as reliable as the rain and the snow in March of 2022. Hills will sing, and trees will clap, because God is setting the people free. It will happen. And all creation will celebrate. God is promising the people that they are moving into a future, right now, and that God will always be at home with them.

Today Ivy is given a new home with this small bit of water up here at the front of a church. Or rather, with this water and the word that was spoken, with this gathering of people, Ivy is given a home with a people, and God has spoken clearly and said, "Ivy, you will always have a home with these people, wherever they are; Ivy, you'll always have a home with me, and I will always make my home with you."

Like all of us, Ivy will find her home in the world, and the world is a troubled

place. Where nations invade nations or just move in and take over from whoever was already there; where countless millions of people have to leave their house or their land because it's not safe to stay; where people still think that their race or gender or love is the right one, and where human worth is so often measured in money. And it's a beautiful place, where the aspen trees in a summer breeze really do clap their hands, and where mom and dad can go gaga over this baby who is just the best thing in the world – along with her sister, of course. Where people learn to love and try really hard to make a world that works for everyone; where there is music and art and laughter, and the long list gets longer and longer. And although we will never go back to a place or a time that is like it was a few years back, we will always go into a future where God is at home and promising that the good gift of life will win the day.

We do get to return home. During Lent we hear a call again and again to return to our God, and to return to our God is to return home: Home to baptismal water where God speaks the word of life to Ivy and to us: Home to a promise that from this moment on we are led out in ways of joy and peace; Home to a promise that because Christ has died and risen, we too die and rise to new life every day; Home to a promise that and all creation will rise to new life; Home to a promise that God's love will never end; Home to a promise that through all of our days the risen Christ is at home with us.

AMEN