

Date: December 10, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Advent 2

**SERMON: Heading Home**

Text(s): Luke 3:1-6; Phil. 3:1-11

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When Carol and I went out to Malaysia in 1974 to serve a predominantly Chinese congregation, we knew very little about the country. We quickly learned that it was divided into two parts, East and West Malaysia. Twelve of the fourteen states, including the national capital were in West Malaysia. The other two states, including our state of Sarawak, were 500 miles away across the South China sea on the island of Borneo.

In 1979, for the first time ever, the hereditary ruling sultans of the twelve West Malaysian states decided to hold their quadrennial Rulers' Conference in East Malaysia. They would come "slumming" as it were, to the backwoods provinces in Borneo, and give all of us poor, undeveloped country cousins the privilege of seeing their royal faces. Imagine the President deciding to bring the entire Cabinet and White House staff to have a week-long conference in, say, Millinocket. You get the picture.

But they hadn't reckoned with the Chief Minister of our state, who was an ambitious, wealthy, and very powerful (if thoroughly corrupt) politician. He decided that when the sultans left our state to return home, they would never again think of Sarawak as an undeveloped provincial place. He was going to put us on the map.

The first thing to get attention in the preparations for this royal visit were the roads. Now we had a pretty fair network of paved roads, linking Kuching the state capital with many outlying small towns and villages, at least as far out as 60 or 70 miles in some directions. But about a year before the sultans came, road building crews with their heavy earth-moving and paving machinery appeared as though out of

nowhere, and existing roads began to be widened and repaved, and new roads were built. A whole new bridge was built across the river and a ten mile-long swath was cut through groves of coconut palms and secondary jungle Straight as an arrow, level, wide, smoothly paved, it was, literally, a highway fit for a king. And at the point it ended, a stunning new parliamentary complex was built for the state government headquarters. The new road was festooned with decorative arches every couple of miles, each of which was strung with thousands of colored lights. And then the finishing touch was that Europe and Asia were scoured for every available Rolls Royce, Bentley, and Mercedes limo that could be rented, so that each of the sultans could travel in a Rolls or Bentley, and their accompanying staffs in Mercedes limos on our newly paved roads. Why go to the trouble of building all these magnificent highways and then chauffer people around in Toyotas?

Ancient peoples also built roads through the wilderness to accommodate visiting royalty. That image is the one St. Luke, in our gospel lesson, uses to characterize the ministry of John the Baptist in relation to that of Jesus. Luke chose a quotation from the book of the prophet Isaiah, to help his readers understand, how John's ministry prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus. *The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

When Isaiah wrote those beautiful lines, which have become permanently embedded in our memories as a result of the decision of George Frederick Handel to include them in his oratorio *The Messiah*, he wrote them to a people who were going through some of the darkest days of their nation's history and of their personal lives. Conquered by the expansionist Babylonian empire, the political and spiritual leaders of Judah and Jerusalem had been carted off into exile, deported from their land, and the land itself left in ruins. The magnificent Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the heart and soul of Jewish identity, was razed to the ground.

Deprived of their religious and spiritual center, cut off from their home, with no clear sense of who they were any more, and with nothing on the horizon to give them hope, they were in spiritual as well as geographical exile. The prophet promised that God was coming to deliver them, but they needed to prepare the way, prepare the road. The road wasn't for God to travel on, however. It was the road for them to travel on, the road over which they would travel from their place of exile back to their home.

The experience of exile, voluntary or involuntary, is something that many of us have known, if not in the geographical sense that Israel did, then in a more metaphorical and spiritual, sense that the people in John the Baptist's day did. Being in exile is being far from home with no immediate way back.

Some of us have experienced being exiles in the literal, geographical sense, even if our exile was voluntary; a job opportunity or a chance to spend a year of our education abroad took us to live in another country and culture. And while voluntary exile has many positive and enriching aspects, there is always the sense that one is out of context, of not belonging, of being away from home, particularly if the people in our place of exile speak a different language. Unlike tourists who travel for pleasure and always have the round-trip ticket home with them, those who work or live abroad are strangers in a foreign land, even if it is by our own choice.

There are other experiences of exile than the geographic or cultural, however. The couple going through the pain of a broken marriage and divorce knows what being in exile means. The one other person in the world who has become "home" for us, is no longer our "home," and we are somewhere outside in the cold. Even the words we use to describe that experience—words like "separation," "estrangement," "leaving," are exile words. It's much the same for the person whose spouse dies, leaving them with the unfamiliar task of making a new life for

themselves, alone.

A child leaving home for the first time to go to the university or to take a job in another city or region of the country, misses the familiar comforts and the familiar frustrations of living in the bosom of the family. The emotional landscape is strange. The road signs are unfamiliar. We have to learn how to survive in this new place called "independence" or "growing up."

What person going through the hell of an emotional breakdown or struggling with an addiction or compulsive behavior doesn't know the experience of exile, in this case, one of the worst exiles of all—exile from one's own true self which has come under the control of the addiction rather than our own wills.

In all these senses, and others as well, in which we can identify with the experience of exile from home, the one thing we need and long for is for the right of return. We want to go home, or at least to know that we can go home if we want to. We all know the old definition of home as "the place that when you go there, they have to take you in." Home may have its own problems and frustrations to deal with, but it's still home. We may not even like all the folks at home; relatives can sometimes be a sore trial, as we all know too well, but nevertheless, home is the place where we know we belong. The experience of belonging is a deep-rooted need for all of us. Hardly any experience of life is more alienating and painful than the feeling of being alone, without support, without any place or anyone to belong to. When St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you," he was talking about that deep need we all have to go home, to be at home. And Augustine correctly grasped that all of our questing, all of our journeys through life, are ultimately a quest for our heart's true home, a quest for God.

And yet, as any of us exiles have discovered, it's not always easy to go home, is it? The road home is not always straight or clearly marked. It may be full of dangerous curves or hairpin turns. It may have a lot of bumps, a lot of hills and valleys that make traveling difficult. The road home may be full of emotional potholes. Before we can head for home, we have to prepare the way. Sometimes the only way we can get there is to build a new road. The way home almost never takes us back over the roads we've already traveled. We learn that fact through hard, and sometimes bitter experience. We can never simply go back. The way back home is always forward. We understand backward, but we live forward. The road home always beckons to us from before us, from the future. We may discover that the way we're going is the wrong way to get home, and then, we need to change direction. That's what repentance means; it means changing direction, but it does not mean simply retracing our steps. It means taking a new compass reading for home from the point where we are, and then preparing the road over which we will travel to get there.

That taking of our bearings, of looking back to understand where we've been and looking ahead to where we want to be is the work of Advent. Just as John the Baptist called the people of Judea to that work of preparation, of reorientation, of spiritual road construction, so we are called to the same work. Home beckons, but the road home often has to be built through the desert or the jungle. We have to do the construction work of carving out a new road through the wilderness, of building new bridges, of filling in the potholes and leveling the rough places. Deliverance is promised, but we will only meet our Deliverer on a road that we ourselves have prepared by repentance and courage and self-sacrifice and commitment.

In the small-town church in New Jersey I served after we returned from Malaysia, I got a call one evening, just after we had finished eating

dinner. It was a woman, and I could tell from the tone of her voice, that she was in exile in a foreign land. She was calling from the local police station. Her husband had just been arrested on his third charge of driving under the influence of alcohol, and in New Jersey, that meant automatic loss of his driving privileges for 12 years. It also meant the likely loss of his job because he'd have no way to get to work. She had reached the end of her road with him. She was tired. They'd been married for sixteen years, and it had been sixteen years of struggle against his binge drinking. He'd stay sober for two or three months, but inevitably, his inner demons would get the best of him, and the whole cycle would repeat itself. He'd lost job after job, and now, on his third arrest, he was looking at a dim employment future.

She was just going to leave him there in the police station and walk away from him and the marriage, away from everything and try to find her own way home again. But one of the policeman suggested that she might want to talk to the pastor of the church across the street from the police station, so she called. She wasn't promising anything, but she felt she'd at least like to talk it through with someone. So I went to the church and met with her and her husband for several hours that evening. She was angry, hurt, and bitter. He was deeply ashamed and depressed.

By the end of the evening, they had made a covenant with one another with me as their witness to do some road-building to try to find their way home. It was hard work. He agreed to go back to AA and continue to go regularly to meetings. She agreed to try to get her employer to allow her to change her hours a bit so that she could drive him to work every morning, so that he wouldn't lose his job. They both agreed to begin to attend church every week without fail unless they were physically ill, even though neither of them had much religion in their background. But people who are desperate will

try anything, it seems, even God. They even agreed, at my suggestion to spend some time each morning before going to work praying together about their marriage. We agreed to meet weekly together for as long as it took to find out if they had a future or not, and together at those weekly meetings, we talked about road-building, and all the essential pieces of heavy equipment they needed, like repentance and forgiveness and honesty and love.

When I left that parish a few years later, they were still together, he hadn't had a relapse in two years, and they had become deeply embedded in that community of faith, supported and nurtured by others who welcomed them in, gave them a seat at the family table, and learned to care about them and love them. They had found their way home

Most of us are probably not in as much of a crisis of exile as that couple. Our own exiles may be quieter, though sometimes no less desperate in our need to find our way home. But in one way or another, all of us are heading for home, and we need to prepare the way in order to get there.

Helping one another with preparing the way to go home is really one of the main things the church is all about, or should be. That's the point of being a community of faith. It's hard to build a road alone. We need a whole crew of laborers and surveyors and engineers. It's only together that we can learn how to operate the heavy equipment of forgiveness, of peacemaking, of justice, of love for one another and ourselves. It's together that we learn how to have our minds and hearts purged of old values and habits and new ones put in place, to have the crooked places made straight and the rough places made plain. If we will do the work of preparing the way we will discover, not only that God is on that road with us, but that the welcome awaiting us at home will be the fulfillment of all our heart's deepest desires.