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The Dream of Home (Psalm 126)

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When the rulers of Judah suffered defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonian empire in the 6th century BCE, they couldn't say they hadn't been warned. The prophet Jeremiah had been crying out for years, warning of the consequences of systemic injustice within Israel, protesting its denial of threat from without. But his words had fallen on deaf ears, much like the words of scientists in our day, who have been warning for years that the injustice and unsustainability of our way of life makes pandemic more or less inevitable. And as for the people of Judah, so for us – lo, it has come to pass.

Over the past few weeks, we've been reflecting on our experience of pandemic in the light of psalms of exile; exploring the necessity of lament, the possibility of meeting God in the chaos as deep calls to deep, asking what it means truly to wait on God in and through such a time. Tonight, in this final reflection in our series, we turn to the biblical promise of restoration and redemption, the dream of home. I am wondering how this promise might speak to our situation, what imaginative resource it offers, for us and for our community.

At one level, it's a dream that seems entirely natural. If you're displaced and disrupted, of course you want things back the way they were in 'days of old' (Lamentations 5.20). 'When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them"'. (Psalm 126.1-2). Psalm 126 seems an ecstatic exclamation of sheer relief. At last, it's over, we're given back the life we thought we'd lost, we're home. It sounds like just the restoration we too long for – restoration as resumption, picking up more or less where we left off. Or is it? If the life we lived before really was

unjust, if it really was lived at some level in denial of reality, then is that where we want to return? Is that what 'home' means?

The dream of home permeates the whole of Scripture. And it's not just about geography or a way of life. From God's promise to lead Moses and the people of Israel into a land flowing with milk and honey, to the prophetic vision of Jerusalem restored after the Babylonian exile, to the New Testament promise of 'a homeland' in heaven (Hebrews 11.14-16) and of the reconciliation of all things (Colossians 1.20), it's as if our faith tradition speaks to some awareness of fundamental alienation and estrangement, some deep human yearning for place; for rest, belonging and lasting peace.

Rowan Williams has written movingly of Mary Magdalene going back again and again to Jesus' tomb as an expression of this same yearning. Jesus was the one who had loved and affirmed Mary, given her a sense of belonging. With his loss, she too is, in some sense, lost. But Williams describes her persistent returning as 'the refusal to accept that lostness is the final human truth. Like a growing thing, beneath the earth, we protest at the darkness and push blindly up in search of light, truth, *home* – the place, the relation where we are not lost, where we can live from deep roots in assurance. Mary goes blindly back to the tomb' and when she is met by the risen Lord, she finds herself home at last. Her 'protest' (writes Williams), 'her dissatisfaction with dissatisfaction, is decisively vindicated'.¹ In the biblical vision, our dream of home-coming is honoured by God; we're promised its fulfilment.

Yet at the same time, our tradition is clear that if 'home' is to be and to remain true then it must be received as gift, rather than grasped as possession or manufactured as achievement. When Moses is told to lead his people to the promised land, God describes it always as 'the land that I will give you', and when Mary goes back to the empty tomb she finds her new belonging 'given' – something is done for her that she simply could not do for herself. 'When *the Lord* restored the

¹ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.40.

fortunes of Zion', says the psalmist, 'we rejoiced'. And this suggests that, on the biblical vision, the gift of home and all it signifies (rest, place, assurance) is a fruit, essentially, of relationship with God. It's something vital, responsive. It becomes corrupted and corrupting when it's detached from this relationship, from answerability to the Giver; when it's possessed for its own sake and on our terms.

So what does this biblical dream of home mean for us? I've said that on the one hand, we want to go home; we want our life restored in some recognizable form – to travel freely, to share meals with friends and family, to gather for worship without having to take extraordinary measures to restrict numbers and wipe down every imaginable surface. On the other, we know that like the people of ancient Jerusalem, we cannot with any integrity simply resume our old life – as if there were nothing illusory about it, nothing unsustainable. The homecoming we really yearn for – / really yearn for – is a whole world restored to well-being, a whole world at peace and allowed to flourish. So how do we live towards *this* homecoming? How might God's promise to us of the possibility of *authentic* restoration animate our lives, our prayer, our imagining of a future from the midst of this crisis?

The temptation is, of course, to imagine the home we think we want and then seek to make it happen. We know how we'd like it to be (I certainly think I do), and I want to fix and manage and reform my way to it. Except that, on the biblical account, that isn't going to work. Home, remember, is essentially gift and call. It is a newness, a possibility that's not self-made, but is genuinely from beyond. It's the fruit of an ever-deepening availability for God.

This isn't easy to talk about in the public arena. Speaking of the prophetic vocation, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes: 'What is most needed is what is most unacceptable – an articulation ... that makes way for new gifts about to be given'.² But what's dangerous in this way of talking is that it sounds close to the avoidance of proper responsibility. Waiting on God looks like passivity, Brueggemann

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2001), p.63.

says, and 'it stands at the brink of cheap grace, as grace must always do'.³ And it's true that there are things we know we must do and work towards, commitments and changes we can and are making, here and now. But it's not all there is.

Because what will bring us truly home is not just more effective deployment of solutions we already know – a vaccine, a tweaked welfare system, a grudging enhancement of environmental protections and the social contract. What this time of exile is calling and opening us for is not simply the reform of established systems, but a wholesale shift in consciousness and in our way of being human – a genuine newness in our culture's relationship with the natural world, a renewed connection with the deep source of our life, giving rise to a new sharing of life with one another. What we're being called into is the possibility of communion – at every level.

Brueggemann says the prophetic task is to keep imagining, articulating, holding open space for the new beginning God longs to give ... without us knowing exactly how to effect it, without its realisation being directly under our control. And it seems to me this means not only holding open that space in the world, but within us ... keeping faith with our deepest yearning for home, bearing the pain of exile and irresolution as we do. Growth in faith, says Williams, 'is the passionate constancy of returning to what seems a grave, a void ... in the hope of hearing one's name spoken out of the emptiness. "Deep calls to deep": ... If we answer that call ... [our] story turns the corner into life and promise ... We are given a task to do, given a gift to give'.⁴

'Restore our fortunes, O Lord', the psalmist prays. 'May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy'. And then, astonishingly comes the promise – without evidence and beyond reason: 'Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves'.

³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p.78.

⁴ Williams, *Resurrection*, p.41.