

If I were to say to you, “you’re going home”, what would it mean to you? I suspect it would mean many things. For most of us, not that much, probably. For most of us, going home is one of the very mundane activities that we do several times a day. I go home from work, I leave, I go back home from the gym, I go home to walk my dog. Going home can be – is often – a very ordinary activity. But not always. Not always.

Sometimes going home is not ordinary. There is something deeply moving about going home when it is not ordinary. Going home from the hospital with a new child. Going home from Iraq or Afghanistan. Going home after the funeral. Sometimes going home is extraordinary because of where we are coming from. In those moments when going home is not ordinary but very extraordinary, going home is much, much more than simply reaching a destination, or setting out for it. In those moments, the act of going home represents a whole change of being, a return to the bedrock on which rests the foundation of our lives.

For a number of years, when I was in Seminary, and after that, in a post-graduate fellowship, I lived in places where I knew that I would not set down any deep roots. Many of you remember that when you are a student, or a Fellow, you know that you are probably only there for a time, only sojourning for the length of your program. For me, it lacked a sense of permanence, of history, and frankly because I knew when I’d move on, it lacked a feeling of future. It felt at times like something of an existence in limbo. Have you ever felt that way? This sort of limbo existence continued until such time as I signed a mortgage, at which point my debt-to-income ratio suddenly felt alarmingly permanent.

The experience has led me to the belief that when we build our lives in a place, that is when it becomes home. That is when it becomes the point around which we orient ourselves.

Home is far more than a dwelling place. Home represents stability, safety, familiarity and comfort. In one of the more sentimental reflections I have heard, a former colleague declared she had nearly fallen, hook, line and sinker for the fellow she was dating simply because he had informed her that for him, home was wherever she was.

So there are circumstances, situations in which home represents far more than bricks and mortar, far more than real estate.

Fred Craddock remembers sitting next to a young woman on a plane who was returning from a long overseas journey, who had been traveling around Europe for months and as they approached their destination, he asked her more about her trip, what was her favorite place – the Alps – and as they approached the final descent, fasten seatbelt signs on, she rummaged around in a bag and drew out her camera and began taking pictures out of the plane window. “You’ve been in the Alps,” he said, “But you are taking pictures of Oklahoma?” She looked at him with a level gaze, he continued and replied, “But this is home.”

But when the roots are ripped out, when people are forced into refugee status, home means something very different. Home means much more.

Take the Israelites. If the reign of King David represented the high-water mark of Ancient Israel, then the captivity in Babylon is certainly its low ebb. There, they were far from home. Far from the lives they loved, far from the land that had been promised, far from all that represented hope and comfort and stability.

And to make it worse, to add insult to injury, according to their own stories, it was their own fault. If David represented the high water mark in Israel’s history, it was rocket-sled ride down from those heights. In the course of a handful of generations, Israel went from being the

top of the heap to the bottom. They went from following wise leaders to following foolish ones. And the result was destruction.

When the country was unified behind David, a man after God's own heart, they seemed unstoppable. But no sooner had David died than the leaders started playing politics, each seeking their own gain and glory. And as they strived each for their own good, they chipped away at their own unity until finally, Israel, or actually, at this point Judah, as the northern kingdom had long since fallen, began the politically dangerous game of making alliances with their enemies. In an utterly fool hardy turn of events, the king of Judah made alliances first with one enemy and then with another before finally, the strongest of them all got wise to what was going on and crushed them. And God had warned them against this course of action. It was their own fault.

It gets worse, though. God's people in allying with their enemies, had sought to hedge their bets by "worshipping" their enemies' gods ... just a little ... just hedging bets ... we didn't really mean it ... And God warned them about that too!

For me, there is just nothing worse than paying the consequences when it is your own fault. I'm fair skinned- if I fail to apply sunscreen, I pay for it for a very long time. Or, take for instance when you're going 20 over on the beltway and get a ticket. (That's not autobiographical.) Or – complete the sentence – fill in the blank – we are frequently culpable for our own stupidity.

That's where Hosea comes in. God warned them about it! Hosea was one of the minor prophets whom God used to speak a word of warning to Judah. Just parenthetically, the only difference between major prophets and minor prophets is verbosity. If you are long-winded, you are a major prophet, short-winded – a minor prophet. It hardly seems fair to me. So, anyhow,

Hosea is a minor prophet speaking a major word. God called Hosea with the task of pointing out to God's people, Judah – the foolishness of their actions.

Now, before we go any further, let's just recap. We have an image of home, and all that it means to us, we have an understanding that foolish actions can yield catastrophic consequences. And we know that Judah is on a collision course with its enemies.

God calls Hosea, and it is a decidedly unusual calling. I'm going to try not making this any more scandalous than it already is. God calls Hosea to live his life as an allegory, to teach an object lesson through his actions. "Go marry a prostitute", God says. And Hosea obeys! They have children, Jezreel, Lo Ruhamah, and Lo Ami, which translate: destruction, not pitied, and not my people.

The allegory of Hosea is God's judgment writ large: the prophet Hosea as long-suffering husband represents God, the prostitute, Gomer, Hosea's wife, represents the unfaithful Judah, throwing herself at every nation, every entity but God, and the children, *destruction, not my people*, and *not pitied*, well, they represent the consequences of such an unfaithful union.

God has spoken. The judgment is set. Judah will suffer.

The historical circumstances coincide. The kingdom does fall. The people do lose their homes. God's chosen are dragged off into slavery.

For those looking for a hard God, a cruel task master, Hosea would seem to deliver. God justifiably wounded declares once and for all, It's Over. I'm done with unfaithful union. You have ignored me once time too many. Judah, I'm withdrawing my protection. There! See how it goes for you now!

Except, that isn't the end of the story. Hosea doesn't end there. It would be so easy to end there, to storm off in righteous indignation. Have you ever done that? Thrown in the towel, washed your hands? It can be so tempting.

But that isn't who God is. That isn't how God chooses to be. No matter what the offense is, God still wants us to know we belong to God.

There's a particular visual image I love: of God creating creation and falling in love with it, holding the world in God's hands and staring transfixed at it. You see, the Bible is a love story, chronicling God's ongoing love-affair with creation. God made us and loves us, and despite us, has chosen never to leave us behind.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him. The more I called them, the more they went from me. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk ... I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks."

God made us and loves us and will not leave us over to the consequences of our Sin.

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim, How can I hand you over, O Israel?"

A number of years ago, a minister friend of mine, now deceased, handed over his brand new car to his son, who was in need of a car, and bought a cheaper one to replace for himself. This struck me as more than a little odd. I'd have given the cheaper car – or bought an even cheaper one, until my friend Fred explained his action "In his line of work, he needed to present himself well." I must have looked unconvinced, because he went on, and what he said caught me: "You never really get over your children"

You never get over your children. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel?"

I've read Hosea several times. I wasn't surprised by the imagery of the prostitute wife and the ill-named children – in fact, the clear oddity of that was almost lost on me this past week – I guess you call that getting institutionalized. But as I read Hosea last week, the last line caught me, stuck in my throat, as it were: “And I will return them to their home, says the Lord.”

There is a lot of Gospel in that phrase – “I will return them to their homes.”

God, who can choose as God will, God who is absolutely free, has chosen.

God has chosen ... not the way of destruction, not the way of salving wounded ego, but instead the way of redemption. “I will return them to their homes.”

Notice the 1st person: I will return them to their homes. Not, I will let them go, Not, I will let them off the hook, Not, they can go back on their own – but rather, intimately, closely tied to God's people: “I will return them to their homes.”

I will return them to peace, and hope, and comfort and ... safety. I will take them where they cannot take themselves.

There's Gospel in that for us! You never really get over your children. I will return them to their homes.

When I was in college, I would periodically drive a delivery van for my Dad's company. It was comparably easy money and that's why I did it. Sometimes my brother would ride with me, and occasionally, my dad would, actually, more often it was my dad, whose time, incidentally, was worth far more than mine. I could never understand why he didn't just go home after a long day of work and trust me to do the job.

Here's the funny thing: it took me years to realize that it wasn't about delivering drugs – my dad's a pharmacist. I'm not sure it wasn't until years later that all the pieces came together for me. I was driving home from New Jersey and somewhere around Spencer, NC, when I

reached the northernmost part of my old delivery route, it occurred to me: it was never about delivering medicine when my dad rode with me. He never wanted me to go by myself. It was about making sure I came home safe.

“I will return them to their homes,” says God.

If there is a **right** to be wounded, it lies with God. If there is a **right** to turn and walk away, it lies with God.

That is not what God chooses.

Let’s be clear about this. God is the creator. We are the creature. God wanted us to be a certain way – to live a certain way: for each other, for God – showing God’s good purpose – that is, after all, what God called Israel/Judah to do, after all, to live so that others know who God is.

When we fail, God is not at fault. When we don’t do what is good, God hasn’t failed. We have. That’s what sin is: to turn our backs on God’s love for us.

And yet God won’t leave us to this. God wants so much more for us. “I will return them to their homes.”

Going home. What does that mean to you? What does it mean that God is the one who will carry you there?

There’s surface and a subsurface level to this text. God loves us, wants the best for us, and is working for redemption for us. And then there is the subsurface level: no matter where we are, even in death, God will bring us home –

home to stability, home to safety, home to hope and comfort.

I hope I haven’t tortured the imagery here. I’m sure there remain folks for who the prospect of returning to a home they knew as a child is fearful proposition. I’m reminded of that scene in *Forrest Gump* when Jenny can’t find enough rocks to throw at the home where she grew

up. That is not the allusion I want to draw today. I would no more want to associate home with God for someone whose experience of home is broken than I would want to associate God as Father to someone whose father was abusive.

No, the image here is of a God who carries us, the mender of broken hearts, the rebuilders of broken homes, the healer of broken lives.

What I hope we gather is the gracious action of God. I want us to realize the extraordinarily extravagant love that God pours out on a bunch of unworthy sinners because God will not let us go.

On occasion it can seem that Presbyterians, or at least Presbyterian ministers talk a lot about sin. And maybe we do. Facing up to sin is hard work. It's ugly because sin is hurt – it's not so much about doing bad things and being sorry, though that is a part. It's about seeing our own brokenness and the ways we have hurt others. But the word of Hosea stands for all of us. The word of Hosea is for all who are far away, all who need to be brought home to a place of wholeness, love, charity... superlatives abounding.

Again, when I was in seminary, I had to write a piece of “evocative prose”. I had a personal rebellion going against a caricature of poetry then, so I wrote a paragraph about the drive from New Jersey to Charlotte. “It just wasn't the same to fly. Driving gave me time to want to be there. I had time to want to be home.” My closing sentence reflected that, as I came home, as I rounded the drive and saw the ceiling fans circulating slowly on the porch in the breeze, “everything, for a moment, was right in the world.”

It was a simplistic vision, frankly, a sentimental one – ceiling fans and the crunch of gravel under the tires –

But isn't it what God promises – wants for us – that we should know that – sinners thought may all be – no – all are – still, God can't get over God's creation – still God wants us to come home – to be where God wants us to be? To be, in the words of the Psalmist, "like a child at home?"

Isn't that what Jesus taught?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.