

Homesick

Third of four sermons in the series “*At Home at Church*”

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- Exodus 16:1-3, 6-7, 9-15 Good News Translation¹² “Tell them that at twilight they will have meat to eat, and in the morning they will have all the bread they want. Then they will know that I, the Lord, am their God.”
- John 14:1-14 Good News Translation³ And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Trust Jesus to lead his church to new, unimaginable places.

When it comes to the “top ten” stories in the Bible I’m sure that one of them has to be the story of “The Exodus.” Living under the brutal rule of the Egyptian pharaoh, God called an Israelite named Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. They were to head for a distant, unknown land that God promised would be a place of safety and prosperity. There was a back-and-forth between Moses and Pharaoh about whether or not the ruler would do the right thing and “let the people go.” A series of plagues beset the Egyptian nation. Pharaoh got the message: the God of the Israelites wanted Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to pack their bags and get out of town, which they did.

Early in their journey the throng approached the Sea of Reeds which was a large region something like Florida’s everglades. By that time Pharaoh had changed his mind about giving up all that free labor. He sent his army’s charioteers to reclaim the newly-freed slaves. That’s where Moses parted the waters of the sea allowing the Israelites to proceed to safety on the other side. The episode ends with Pharaoh’s pursuing army being engulfed when the parted waters returned to their place.

For the newly-freed Israelites, “so far so good.” But a few day’s travel became a few weeks, and the excitement and novelty of the camping life was wearing off. People were tired: tired of walking, tired of unpacking and repacking, tired of the same small portions of the same old camping food. So as we heard in Exodus Chapter 16, “they all complained to Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘We wish that the Lord had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat and as much other food as we wanted.’”¹

Of course they didn’t really wish that God had killed them while still slaves in Egypt. Their hyperbole was like me saying, “I’d rather die than have to eat mushroom soup!” As much as I dislike mushrooms, a stupid fungus does not bring out a death wish in me.

So the Israelites complained, “Back in Egypt we could have had meat and broccoli and yams and hummus.” Were the Israelites really homesick for the home cooking? More likely they were uneasy about the uncertain future that lay before them. None of them had been where they were going. No one knew the route God would take them on. It was anybody’s guess how long it was going to take to get to wherever this Promised Land was. So what appeared to be an Israelite case of homesickness was really a time when the foundation of their faith was being shaken. Their homesickness was a reluctance to move to a new place, a new reality, a new way of living that God was leading them to.

Thank goodness that doesn’t happen anymore!?!

Are we reluctant to let go of the familiar in exchange for something different?

- How do you react if your favorite dish is taken off the menu at a restaurant you frequent?
- Or what do you do when TV networks change the schedule of the shows you always watch at such-and-such a time?
- This would never happen around here, but imagine road construction forcing you to change the route you always take. You may get used to the detour, but doesn’t it always feels like an inconvenience aimed personally at you?

¹ Exodus 16:2-3a Good News Translation

- Last year my favorite brand of dress shirt suddenly and without notice changed the cut of their tailoring without changing the name of that style. When I bought some new shirts, suddenly the same model of shirts I'd been wearing for years didn't fit the same. I grumbled about having to find a new brand that fits the way I like.

So yes, like the Israelites in the wilderness we know what it's like to be homesick – yearning for the way things used to be rather than opening ourselves to new, unknown opportunities.

It's no secret that the Christian church is experiencing changes so broadly and so rapidly that it's causing reactions of homesickness in many church-goers.

I think I've shared before the frustration expressed by a minister colleague who once observed, "I'm ministering in the 2000s, having been trained in the 1980s to serve a model of church that was prevalent in the 1950s." We know what church *used* to be like but have a hard time recognizing that the societal setting around us has changed.

Maybe you remember the days when there was an unspoken rule that nothing was to be scheduled on Wednesday nights or Sundays because those were "church times." If you're in the Bible Belt in the South, Wednesday nights still may be "untouchable." But not around here, nor in most of the United States from what I hear.

For that matter, it's no secret that Sundays are no longer set apart for religious services and family togetherness.

This change in our society's attitude toward church occurred for many reasons. Commercial interests seeking to maximize profits saw Sundays as an opportunity for more business. In the 1960s and 1970s the so-called "Blue Laws" that for decades had restricted commercial activity on Sundays were gradually repealed state by state and community by community. (Even twenty years ago my mother-in-law still refused to go shopping on Sundays, as that would have been unthinkable to anyone in her tiny western Ohio farming community when she was growing up.) Society also realized that our nation's diverse religious traditions hold religious observances not only on Sundays, but Fridays and Saturdays as well. And if retail store employees have to work on Sundays, what's to keep others from going to the office or grabbing their laptop on Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning and polishing off some emails or finishing a report before the formal workweek begins?

Other societal changes causing us to be "homesick" for the church of yesteryear include the explosion of youth sports programs. This has happened in part because parents don't want their children to be left behind in developing athletic skill, and in part because of the trend for children today to be scheduled into more activities overall than they once were. When fields or gyms or ice rinks are available on Sundays, that's when games and even practices are being scheduled. We see some children in their uniforms here on Sundays because they have just returned from or are on their way to a game.

The idea of society protecting time for religious organizations has gone by the wayside. So, too, has the inherent appreciation for the church's role in being a community's primary resource for spiritual reflection, social order and moral guidance. Most people today don't assume that they need to connect with a local church for their lives to be somehow "complete." Rising generations simply don't understand what a church has to offer. They look at churches the way you might look at restaurants or stores that you never check out because you *know* you aren't interested in whatever they have to offer.

Another change in the Christian landscape is the reluctance of rising generations to trust an institution like a church. It might be because of the hypocrisy they've seen in a few mass-media religious leaders, or their sense that some televangelists are little more than smooth-talking swindlers, therefore anyplace calling itself a church must be a bunch of self-serving hypocrites, and who would want to associate with a place and with people like that? Instead of seeking the fellowship of a church, rising generations get a sense of community through their social media connections, and they feel spiritually fed by profound interpersonal connections or by the awe of the world of nature.

Is the landscape we sit in changing? Yes, for us, and for River Methodist and St. Thomas Lutheran and even St. Christopher Church and most churches in America. Jesus urges us to "go and make disciples – followers" of his way: his way of love, peace, generosity, mercy, acceptance, forgiveness, compassion. So how do we go about making disciples if we're no longer supposed to do it the way we've always done it?

Recall that the Israelites wandered in the desert, homesick for what was familiar and comfortable..? Here's their problem: trying to stay with what they knew would have only served Pharaoh,

not God. God wanted to lead them to a Promised Land, to a new reality, to a new relationship with God that would be fruitful in ways they had trouble envisioning.

It's natural for Christ's church to be homesick for the ways that we know, the ways that are familiar. Christ called the church into being to bring knowledge of God's saving love to people everywhere. In ancient times the earliest Christian fellowships were so-called "house-churches" because followers of Jesus would gather in private homes for their worship and fellowship. That changed into the earliest Roman basilicas in which legal court buildings were converted into houses of worship. That evolved into worshiping communities based in the grand cathedrals of the Middle Ages, which translated across the ocean to the frontier churches of colonial America, which eventually evolved into the urban and suburban churches of the new millennium. It's natural for us to be "homesick" for what's familiar, but let's realize that Christ's church has evolved continuously ever since the night of his resurrection when he appeared to his disciples behind locked doors.

Maybe you're wondering, *"Well, as a local congregation, are we a has-been? Is there a future for the church?"* Remember this: in Jesus God created the church, and we can trust that God will use the church as God wishes so God's will can unfold as God desires. It's not about us; it's about what God wants. Our church's Vitality & Renewal Team has been busy all summer helping our church leadership figure out how to grapple with what we need to hold fast to, and what innovation we should embrace. The Vitality & Renewal Team has benefitted a lot from the input many of you have provided, and they and I still welcome your comments, observations, questions and suggestions about what might lie ahead for our church.

So, for instance, it's natural for us to tend to get wrapped up in questions of form, issues like: *should the minister and choir wear robes, or would we be more "relatable" in street clothes? Should we be able to show pictures and video during worship or not? Should we have an organ, or should we have electronic instruments, or should we have drums, or should we have recorded music? Should we write prayer requests, or say them aloud, or text them to me during the service?* Those are all means to an end, they're *aids* to our experience of worship but not the subject of our worship; techniques or processes or devices... we don't worship *them*.

We cannot become merely a self-serving organization with the primary purpose of making ourselves comfortable. Jesus wants to use us! That's why he called this congregation into being over sixty years ago! Jesus wants us to be fruitful in helping people in our church and people in the community discover what it is to "Praise God, Teach Faith, Serve Others."

And as we start to realize that we don't want to remain stuck, "homesick" only for what made us comfortable in the past, here's the good news: the good news is that where the church is headed, Jesus is already there! The reading from John's gospel is about new life. Ironically, it's a reading that is usually heard at funerals. And maybe the church is "dying" to an old life and "rising" to a new one.

This is the passage in John's gospel about "many rooms within the Heavenly Father's house." Jesus says, "After I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am." Where he is, we will be also. Jesus is not mired in the ways that once made sense but not so much anymore. He's leading the church in new ways, to a new place, to risk the journey to discover a Promised Land where the church is vibrant and expectant and courageous and generous and accommodating and bold.

One last word: in John Chapter 14 Jesus adds, "You know the way that leads to the place where I am going," and Thomas says, "No we don't." Jesus then explains that he is "the way, the truth, and the life." That's where we are. We stand in the church as we are, looking to Jesus to lead us forward, trusting that he will show us the way, encourage us with the truth, and bless us – individually and as his church – bless us with life.