

## Far From Home

Isaiah 11:1-10

Welcome to the busiest time of the year. In the days and weeks leading up to Christmas, we are all over the place. We spend long hours at work, trying to wrap up a project or two before the office shuts down for the holidays. We have the obligatory parties, the school performances, and a terribly long list of errands to run.

Especially here in Ames, when everything seems to be crammed into the first two weekends before all of the Iowa State students leave town, it feels like a lot. In the run-up to Christmas, we are bouncing here, there, and everywhere, spending time far from the one place we long to be. And where is it that we want to be? You know the answer: home. We all just want to be home, maybe wrapped up under a blanket with a fire going, with the people we love the most in the place that brings us peace.

It's interesting, if you think about it. We endure the hustle of the holidays with hearts yearning for the comforts of home. It parallels the story that sits at the heart of Christmas itself. It's the story of a God who leaves his own home to gather his people—a people whose faith was riddled with doubt and disbelief, whose bodies were breaking and heaving in a sin-sick world, and whose minds raced with fear and uncertainty due to the evil forces swirling about them. God gathers us, so that we can come home to him.

Isaiah was prophesying to a people under the threat of extermination. Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people, had witnessed the obliteration of Israel—the northern kingdom—at the hand of the Assyrians. The world of privilege, protection, and blessing that God's people saw as their birthright no longer existed.

And the reality of themselves being overtaken, exiled, or eradicated cast a shadow over their lives. The lush, large, and enduring tree that was God's people was being felled by outsiders, leaving nothing but a cursed stump, waiting to be ground into non-existence.

This is not just the awful state of God's people in 740 BC. It is a picture, a metaphor, for the state of the entire world as a result of sin. The faithlessness of Israel and Judah would bring about their respective exiles. But long before God's people existed, it was the faithlessness of Adam and Eve that earned the world an exile from Eden. It was their refusal to believe in the promises of God—repeated countless times in the heart of every man and woman since—that pushed you and me into a world where judgment looms and the pains of being ousted from God's presence abound. Our bodies break, our hearts are unfaithful, death taunts us, and we constantly suffer a hunger for approval that no amount of effort and accomplishment can satisfy.

The philosopher Heidegger called it *unheimlichkeit*—a feeling of deep dislocation, of being out of place in the very world we inhabit. It's feeling alienated in our own bodies, living in a world that doesn't meet our deepest needs or fit our true desires. We are out of sync, we are out of rhythm, knowing deep down inside of us that this place, this life—with all of its pains and problems, sins and struggles, evils and atrocities, anxieties and idolatries—isn't what we were made for. You feel it, don't you? There's the perpetual sin that you keep running to, despite all of the promises you've made to your spouse, to yourself, and to God. There's the guilt you can't shake from a mistake in the

past, despite being told time and again that it's been forgiven. There's the chronic pain you carry, despite having worked so hard to take care of your health. There's the heart and soul you poured into kids and career and hobbies and habits, thinking they'd make you feel right and good, full, and happy—only to find that you're still nagged by a sense that you're not enough. It's that quiet whisper: "This isn't how it's supposed to be." We're homesick for a home we've never known. As CS Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

And you're right. It's not. Because this isn't the home God intends for us. Listen to this reminder from Moses in Psalm 90: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:1–2). Your true home, the only place where all will be right, is with God—your true home.

God is coming to bring you home. To him, you have been restored, with him, you have been reunited, and in him, you have rest. He brings us from our sin-earned exile and makes us to dwell with him. He is our home. That's the heartbeat of Isaiah's message and the heartbeat of Advent.

At the center of the Christmas story is the promise that we are, and we will be, brought home to God. This stump of humanity will not be ground to pieces, and the pains and problems of a life lived east of Eden will come to an end. The hurry and hustle of life—where we are forced to run ourselves ragged, bouncing here

and there in an effort to manufacture some sense of meaning, to prove that we matter—has come to an end, and we will end up in the place that truly satisfies, in the place we long to be.

This is the promise that Isaiah proclaims to the beleaguered southern kingdom. He tells them, quite stunningly, that although they are being cut down, a new branch—a fruitful branch—will bloom out of their sad stump: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1). He's promising a king. But not just any king. The fact that Isaiah mentions "the line of Jesse" (David's father) and not the line of David himself indicates that this will be a new David, a greater David, a king to beat all kings. Isaiah is promising that there will be a Savior. And he will be full of the Spirit, filled with wisdom and might, and fear of the Lord. He will be perfect. And look at what he will usher in! He will bring with him a world of peace and safety, a world of justice and goodness, a world that is filled to the brim with the beauty of God—with the unfiltered presence of God himself! He will establish a world that allows the southern kingdom—indeed all of humanity—to breathe a sigh of relief and say, "At last! Home is on the horizon."

And the fulfillment of that promise is found in Christmas, at the advent of Christ—the greater David, the King of all Kings. His birth in Bethlehem is the branch breaking out of the stump of human tragedy.

But take note of how it happens. Mary and Joseph were on a road trip, headed to Bethlehem for a census. And then it's suddenly time for Jesus to be born, and they are stuck with a stable. It's cold. It's awful. And this young woman is going to experience the awful

pains of labor, lying in stink, pushing a child into existence in the most unsanitary conditions possible. Even if we take into account ideas that this is done out of hospitality, out of the idea that the stable was more private than the main house, it wasn't a great experience. This poor, young family is far from home indeed. But there's so much more. Their child is not simply a child chosen by God to rescue his people, but is the incarnate Son of God himself. He is coeternal with the Father, "very God of very God," born as one of us to save us. Jesus enters the world wrapped in the frailties of human flesh and the helplessness of a baby. He arrives exiled from comfort, alienated from anything remotely resembling the glories of Heaven. Talk about far from home.

That's the brutally beautiful, shocking story of Christmas. God joins us in our exile, in our homelessness, in our discomfort to free us from it and to forge a path home. You have to love that. You must. He doesn't send us a map or just give us an address to put in our phones or GPS. He doesn't drop a list of rules to follow so that we can climb our way out via our own moral performance. He doesn't just shout inspiration and encouragement at us, "You can do it!"

No, he leaves home and he joins us. He becomes the Way himself. He buries himself in the stump, emerges from within it, and fights for us. Jesus, whose birth we anticipate, will arrive and he will continue to be exiled and abused; he will be misunderstood and rejected. He will be crucified. He will die. He will experience the worst of what this life can offer. He will succumb to it. But he will rise, showing his power over all of it. And he will announce us—those who belong to him—to be free from the lasting effects of it. All so we could no

longer be exiles from Eden, far from home, but instead be at home with him forever.

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