

The Story Series
Week 19: The Return Home
Rev. Craig M. Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman Texas

“Welcome home!” Those words greeted me this week as I walked into the house upon returning from a three-day conference. Welcome home! Those words are always so wonderful to hear, aren’t they? Especially since it means that we have returned home to our loved ones, to that place that is comfortable and familiar.

In today’s *Story*, after 70 years of being exiled to a foreign land, God’s people are finally invited to come back home. Welcome home, God says. It was surely music to their ears, to hear God speak such welcoming words to them. Despite their sin, despite their rebellion, God welcomes his people back home.

When you think about it, the Bible has many “welcome home” stories. But they aren’t always pleasant stories, are they? The “welcome home” stories of the Bible actually involve such things as pig slop and fish guts. The Prodigal Son can tell you about the pig slop. He requested his portion of the inheritance – before his father’s passing. He took the money and squandered it all in a place like Vegas of his day.

He ended up broke, so he took a job feeding pigs. The salary for feeding swine must have stunk as badly as the pigs did because he grew so hungry that even the pig slop started to look appetizing. That’s what it took for this Prodigal Son to come to his senses and to begin his journey home.

The story of Jonah doesn’t include pig slop, but it does include fish guts. Jonah had a real problem with the assignment given to him by God. (Don’t we all?!) God called him to preach in a city called Nineveh. Jonah despised the Ninevites. They were the scum of the earth in Jonah’s mind. They did not deserve to hear about God’s love, only God’s judgment.

And so, instead of turning right as God had commanded, Jonah turned left. Jonah ran away from God, and God responded by causing a giant fish to swallow Jonah up – God’s version of a “Time Out.” Jonah spent three days in the gut of that fish, and then that great fish vomited Jonah upon the beach of Ninevah. It’s was God’s way of saying “Welcome Home.” Welcome back to the place where you should be. Now get to work.

So we have the Prodigal and the pigs, Jonah and the fish, and we have the Jews and the abandoned Temple foundation. That’s today’s *Story* – a powerful *Story* tucked away in the latter pages of the Old Testament. I realize that it doesn’t have the same zest as pig slop or fish guts, but it does describe a people who experienced a prodigal rebellion, a people who felt like they had been vomited up on a foreign land. It is a *Story* that describes what happens to a people who chose not to live according to the ways of God. It’s a *Story* that

informs us how God responds when we get our priorities all mixed up, when we get off track.

So here's a little background to help us remember where we are. The children of Israel have spent the last three generations exiled in Babylon. If you've been reading *The Story* you know that their beloved city of Jerusalem back in their homeland of Judah was completely destroyed by the Babylonians. If you remember, had it not been for the exceptional courage of Daniel and his three friends – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – God's people might have been lost forever, never coming to their senses.

It was the faithfulness of Daniel and his friends that God honored. And after decades of isolation and judgment, God issues an invitation for his people to return home. And that invitation comes in the most unexpected of ways – through a Persian king named Cyrus. The Bible says that the Lord moves the heart of King Cyrus and gives him the desire to start rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus is going to need lots of people to take on such a building project, and so he invites all of the exiles to return home and to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus not only invites the people back home, but he provides the means by which to fund the building of this holy structure.

So why is God making such a big deal about this Temple? God clearly states in the Scriptures that he doesn't need a house in which to live. The Bible says that God does not dwell in temples made with human hands. So if God doesn't *need* this Temple, why is God making it such a priority? It's because *God's people* need the Temple. We need a place where we can feel the true presence of God with us. We need to sense that God is close by, that God is with us.

The Temple was God's way of reminding his people that he is right there in the middle of them. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, whenever they decided to set up camp and to stay in one place for a while, the first thing they would do is set up the Temple, that mobile tent-like structure called the Tabernacle.

And then, once God's Tabernacle was set up, all of the people of the various tribes would set up their tents all around that Temple structure. God was drawing them a picture of where he dwells: right smack dab in the middle of them.

So it shouldn't surprise us that Jerusalem is the city chosen as the place to build the permanent Temple. Why? Because it is smack dab in the center of the nation. It was a powerful message for God's people. God wants to be among you; God wants to live in the neighborhood. God wants to be at the center of our lives.

As Christians living in the 21st century, as we look back over God's timeline, we can easily see that the Temple was just another way God was preparing the world for the coming of Jesus Christ. For it was Jesus, God's Son, who came into the neighborhood, and lived among God's people, giving them direct access to God the Father. By knowing the whole *Story* of

the Bible, when Jesus comes onto the scene we can connect the dots more quickly and see what God is up to in our lives.

So a fully functioning Temple in Jerusalem was integral to God's plan to save the world. The Temple revealed God's passion: to be among his people. And so after all those decades of exile, God sets into motion the rebuilding of the Temple. The Bible tells us that 50,000 Jews make the 900 mile trek and return home at the prompting of God. Once they are welcomed home, they get to work on rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, in order that the one, true God might be worshipped and glorified.

As soon as the structure of the Temple begins to take shape, naysayers start showing up from all over. It wasn't that they were *against* the Temple *per se*, they just didn't want this new building project to upset the status quo. They knew that the Temple would be a tool to unify and strengthen the Jewish nation, and they feared losing their power and authority. So they began to sabotage this building project.

One would think that God's people would say, "Bring on all the evil schemes you want! Our God is the Most High God, so no one will be able to stop the rebuilding of this holy Temple." But that's not what happened. God's people began to lose focus. They got tired of all of the tricks their enemies were playing, and so each day, fewer and fewer people showed up to the worksite, until one day, not a single soul showed up.

So the building of the Temple came to a stand still. God's half-built Temple sat there for all to see, to mock and to ridicule, as nothing more than an abandoned construction site. It was a message to the world that God's people didn't take God seriously.

In true human fashion, God's people forgot what was most important and they began to focus on their own wants and desires. Almost overnight, houses and business dwellings for the Jews started popping up all over the landscape. Instead of focusing on God, they started focusing on themselves, on their own wants and desires. Is this hitting close to home yet? Yikes!

In true divine fashion, God sends a prophet among His people – a messenger with a "come to Jesus" kind of message. "Why is it," the prophet Haggai asks, "that your houses flourish while God's house languishes?" Perhaps the same question should be asked of us: Why is it that our houses flourish while God's house languishes? Why is it that we have everything, yet so many of God's people have nothing? Do you see how timeless this story is? We all too often lose focus; we forget what's most important. Instead of living out the ways of God, we focus solely on our own needs, and we come up feeling empty and unfulfilled.

So God, through the prophet Haggai, calls the people to repent. He beckons them to return to God, to once again make God their ultimate concern. "Give careful thought to your ways," Haggai says. "You expected much, but it turned out to be so little." Focus solely on yourself, God tells us, and you will never be satisfied. Focus on me, God says, and you will

be satisfied indeed. As the psalmist puts in, with the LORD as my shepherd, “my cup runneth over.”

Where is the focus of your life? If you were to look at your day planner or family calendar or open up your calendar app on your iPhone, what would it reveal? How much time are you giving to the work of the Lord? How much of your time is focused on the needs of other people rather than on your own desires?

Are you building up your own treasures while the treasury of God goes bankrupt? Have you decided to build your life on your own foundation, or on the foundation of Jesus Christ?

“Give careful thought to you ways,” Haggai warns. Life centered on ourselves is marked with futility; nothing will seem to work. Life centered on God is the only kind of life that truly satisfies. To use the psalmist words once again, “When the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need.”

There is a closet in my home office that is... well, let’s just say, it’s quite a mess – an “open at your own risk” kind of closet. Oh, you have a closet like that, too? Inside that closet I have all of these projects that I hope to get around to one of these days. I have boxes of family photographs that I want to digitalize and make into digital scrapbooks. There is a stack of must-read books – probably two feet high – that I have every intention of reading when I get some spare time. I have fabric just waiting to be made into stunning liturgical works of art. And there’s a digital recorder ready to record my musical compositions onto CD.

My closet is like a storehouse of forgotten passions. I believe we’ve all got a closet like that. Don’t get me wrong: I’m not saying “Shame on us for not finishing what we started.” Quite honestly, I’ve learned that some things just aren’t worth finishing. What I am saying is this: Don’t even think for a moment that you can ever put God in your storehouse of forgotten passions. God won’t hear of it. God will not be contained in our “forgotten passions” closet. There’s no use trying to store God away until we get more time for Him. God won’t hear of it. God will not stay hidden behind closed doors. God is in the business of breaking forth into our lives. God is alive and well and will find a way to be an active part of our lives – whether we choose to make time for God or not.

Just as it was for the Jews who returned to Jerusalem, if God is not the first priority in our lives, God will find a way to break into our lives, call us to repentance, and beckon us to once again make His ways our ways. God is either the MAIN thing in our lives, or He’s nothing. As Jesus says, “It’s impossible to serve two masters.” God is either everything, or he’s nothing.

If you’ve packed God up, and put Him in your closet of forgotten passions until you can get around to Him again, then you need to heed the words of Haggai: “Give careful thought to you ways. You expect much, but it will turn out to be so very little.” To pack God away brings forth a life where nothing seems to work.

It's a stern message, isn't it? Not just for you, but for me as well. If you're like me, you tend to wane in your commitment. One day you might do fairly well; the next, not so much. But the good news is that God is constantly calling us back. God is forever issuing us an invitation to return to Him, to come back home into his arms of mercy and love. It gives God no greater joy than to say to us, "Welcome Home" as we come through the door of his House.

Think about it: All of us, through the waters of holy baptism, have been called out of Babylonian captivity of sin, darkness and despair, and welcomed into the glorious city of Jerusalem – that city filled with forgiven saints too many to number. God has spoken "Welcome Home" to each and every one of us. They are welcomed words; words that literally have changed our life.

Let's make a commitment to always keep Babylon in our rear view mirror, and Jerusalem permanently programmed in our GPS. In Jerusalem, within the holy Temple of God, is where we are meant to be. It's our home. God created us to be in relationship with Him.

Let's not pack God away in some storage closet. Let us hear God calling out to us: "Come home, my child. Unpack me from your closet and once again make me a priority in your life. Make me your ultimate concern," God says, "and everything else will fall into place."

The prodigal Son found this to be true. He came to his senses, came home to the Father, and found himself welcomed to a place at the Table. I pray that it will be the same with us. Let's come to our senses, come home to God, and find ourselves welcomed around this Table of mercy, to receive the body and blood of our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

"Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." Welcomed words, indeed. Amen.