

Joshua 3:1-6, Philippians 3:12-21, Luke 1:67-80 – March 21, 2018

One of the best decisions in my life was buying a house. It might never have happened if I hadn't taken the call here to Immanuel. My wife and I were very happy to live in a church-owned parsonage. We had often said we had no interest in owning our own home.

But then we came here. And we really didn't have a choice in the matter. I wasn't going to decline the Call just because it didn't come with a parsonage. And I'm rather glad it all worked out this way.

Because we love our home. Not just for the financial aspects of saving money and building equity. But for the simple fact that it's ours. We can do whatever we want to it. We don't need to ask permission from the Board of Property to put in a new appliance or change the paint color or take out a wall, if we want to. The only people with keys to it are the people we give keys to. Not the 50 men who served as trustees at some time in their life and never gave their key back. It's ours. All ours.

There's something special about having your own home. Something satisfying about calling it your own. Something that makes even a fairly simple, humble house like we have seem so much better to us than it does to anyone else because it's ours.

Ancient Israel knew that fact well. Because they had a home too. It was called Canaan. The Promised Land. A strip of land running between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River that was given to Abraham and passed down to Isaac and then Jacob and then his sons. And it was their own.

We read some pretty impressive descriptions of the Promised Land in the Bible. Deuteronomy 8 says, *“For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you.”*

Wow. I mean... wow. That sounds absolutely fantastic. This has got to be the most amazingly fertile, productive place on earth. Right?

Well... not really. I heard a talk once from a professor at Concordia Seminary who goes to Israel every summer to work on archeological digs there. And he was talking about the “land of milk and honey” language that the Bible uses to describe it. And it is, frankly, a little exaggerated.

Yes, Canaan does have some good farmland. It does have decent water sources. It does have some iron and copper deposits. It did have everything the Israelites would need.

But it is not the amazing breadbasket that Moses describes. In fact, it wasn't that much better than the wilderness of Sinai they were leaving. No, the reason why the Israelites were so excited to reach the Promised Land was because it was their home.

It belonged to them. It was given to them by God himself. For hundreds of years, they had been foreigners in Egypt. For over 40 years they had been aimless nomads in Sinai. But in Canaan they would be home. And that was worth everything to them.

Well, almost everything. It wasn't worth getting squashed by giants. Which was why they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness in the first place. And it wasn't worth giving up their idols and corruption, which was why they got sent into exile in Babylon. Truth be told, the Israelites loved the idea of the Promised Land more than they loved the faith and obedience it would take to live there.

Isn't that how it always is with sinful human beings? We're always happy to receive the good gifts that God gives us. The blessings of home and family, work and leisure, friends and community. We love living in an ordered society of law and government. We're happy to take the rain when it falls and the sun when it shines.

But the moment God requires something from us, we complain. We doubt. We turn to a false god. We indulge in our sin. We seek to be our own gods, knowing good and evil. Even if we know the consequences of doing so. Even if we know it means being cast out of the Garden. Wandering in the wilderness. Being exiled to Babylon.

Truthfully, if it were left to us, we would never reach the Promised Land. The Old Testament is proof of that. God gave the Israelites every single blessing. And they squandered every single good thing He ever gave them. They abandoned every single good home that God ever made for them. And so do we.

Like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' parable, we would much rather be off in a foreign country indulging in our sin than sitting obediently in our Father's house. And we do so knowing that eventually it will mean we'll have to sleep with the pigs.

It's a miracle the Israelites ever made it to Canaan at all. In our Old Testament lesson, Joshua says, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you." He's talking about stopping the Jordan River, much like he once parted the Red Sea, so that the Israelites might enter on dry ground.

But, in many ways, the Lord had already done a wonder among them. He had stayed with them. He had fulfilled his promise and brought them into the good land. This God of perfect justice and righteousness and holiness had shown grace to a sinful people and given them every good thing even though they disobeyed him.

There are wonders of God's power. Wonders of God's judgment and wrath. But then, there are wonders of God's love and grace and mercy.

And that's what God gives us in Jesus Christ. The wonder of his love. As Zechariah said in his song, the Lord who fulfilled his covenant with Abraham has brought salvation for his people. He has saved us from our enemies, even sin, death, and the devil. He has shown mercy to us and forgiven our sins, even when we'd rather live in the wilderness than under his law.

But, according to Zechariah, he hasn't done it by bringing us into a physical Promised Land. No, when Zechariah sang this, he was already in Israel. He was sitting right inside the Temple itself. God has sent his Son to give us a different sort of Promised Land. A land of light and life, instead of darkness and death. A land of peace instead of war with God.

In fact, God isn't going to bring us anywhere at all. When the Israelites went to the Promised Land, they brought along all their sin and doubt and corruption. They didn't truly leave the wilderness. They brought the wilderness with them. And their home became far less than the paradise God wanted it to be.

Christ does the complete opposite. Rather than bring us into the Promised Land, he takes the wilderness out of us. Like the Israelites, he crosses the Jordan River. But in his baptism, he takes all our sin on himself. Like the Israelites, he spends time in exile. But in his days being tempted by the devil, he takes our sin and puts it back where it belongs: in the wilderness. Far away from us.

He creates a Promised Land right where we are. Not by taking us to a land of rivers and food. But by taking away our sin. So that springs of living water might well up inside of us. And his bread from heaven might feed us until we are satisfied.

On the cross, Jesus takes away everything sinful inside of us. He makes our home a true home. Just as he will again on the last day. Because that's what the resurrection is. Not us going somewhere new. But God doing to this whole earth what he has already done inside each person that he has baptized.

Purging everything evil from within it so that it can be a land of milk and honey once again. Transforming our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Calling us his own. And giving us our own home. Not one that we rent from the devil, so to speak. But one bought for us by the blood of Christ. Who has given us a citizenship with him, that we may be home with him forever. Amen.