

What is home? It's a simple question. And yet one that can be profoundly difficult to answer. What is home for you? It varies from person to person.

Sometimes home is a building. A particular house. A particular bedroom or living room or dining room. With all its memories. Sometimes home is a place. A town or region. With all your favorite haunts. Maybe a few friends who still live there. Sometimes home is just a group of people. Your wife and children. Your parents and grandparents. The people you love and trust and depend upon the most.

Home can be many things to many people. Regardless of what it is for you, this next month tends to be a time for going home. Whether it was a few days ago for Thanksgiving. Or in a few weeks for Christmas. Or a little bit longer for New Years. These three holidays, grouped so closely together, usually represent a time when almost everybody goes home in whatever way is most important to them.

So it's interesting – and kind of ironic – that our Old Testament lesson for today should be from the book of Jeremiah. Because if you've ever read the book of Jeremiah or know anything about it, you know that it's pretty much all about leaving home. Or, more specifically, about people being taken from their home. By force.

You see, of all the prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah might be the biggest bearer of bad news. And that's saying something. He goes to the people of Judah with a tremendously harsh message.

You have sinned. You have abandoned your God. You have abandoned God's law. You have embraced corruption. You have turned to false gods.

And you will be punished. An army is coming. It's right on your doorstep. And when this army comes, God will not stop it. He will not protect you.

Many of you won't survive. Many of your children won't survive. And those who do survive will be taken from their homes. From everything they know. Everything they love.

Jerusalem's walls will be torn brick from brick. Your houses will be burned to ashes. But you won't even see that. Because, if you survive, you'll be in a foreign land. Exiles in Babylon. Ruled by a foreign king. Slaves to a foreign people. Surrounded by foreign gods.

It's a pretty bleak picture. And Jeremiah's audience doesn't respond well to it. Their leaders have been telling them for years that there's no reason to worry. Jeremiah doesn't know what he's talking about. He's just stirring up trouble. So they lock him in prison and throw away the key.

Of course, Jeremiah was right. Soon enough, within Jeremiah's lifetime, they do find themselves surrounded by the armies of Babylon. Soon enough, many of them do die by the sword. And the rest are dragged into exile hundreds of miles away.

But when they get there, it's interesting what they discover. Because of all the things about home that they might miss. Their houses. Their land. Their family and friends killed in battle. None of that matters nearly as much as you might think.

No, the thing that they miss most about home is the Temple. That's right, the Temple in Jerusalem. A building that in their corruption and idolatry they had all but ignored for decades. That's what they miss most. That's what made Jerusalem 'home.'

Because the Temple was literally the house of God. It was where God sat on earth. And when you went to the Temple, you always knew that you were coming to meet with God. That he was there. And he wasn't going anywhere. Because he promised to always be there. As long as the Temple stood, God was in Jerusalem.

And now, not only were they far from Jerusalem. Far from the Temple. But the Temple itself had actually been destroyed. Babylon's armies had stripped it bare of everything valuable, and then tore it the ground. They even dug up the foundation, just to obliterate any sign that it had ever been there. And because of that, the Israelites had lost all hope. God had abandoned them.

What the people quickly realize, as they're sitting in exile, is that Jerusalem had been their home because God had made it his home. And that they could be at home anywhere that God was. God's presence was the definition of home for them.

And it's in the midst of this hopeless, lonely longing for God's presence that the Israelites rediscover the words of Jeremiah. They rediscover his prophecies. And they realize that they were not all doom and gloom.

That God did condemn their sin. But God also made them a promise. The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to Israel and to Judah. What was that promise?

Well, it was the promise of a king. A king from the line of David. God had promised that the line of David would never end. David's family would reign forever. And so God promises that such a king will be born, who will rule with justice and righteousness.

That's great. But it gets better. Because this king won't be ruling from just any place. He'll be ruling from Judah and Jerusalem. One day Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell secure. They will have a land and a city again.

And when that happens, the Lord will be their righteousness. The Lord will make his home with them again. And because of that, they will be home.

It's a wonderful promise. One that God fulfilled. 70 years later, the Israelites returned to Jerusalem and laid a new foundation for the Temple. It was long and it was hard, but Jerusalem was rebuilt. The Temple was rebuilt. And God made his home with them again.

The people thought that was good enough. They had their home back. Just like it had been before. A little too much like it had been before, actually.

Pretty soon, their passion for the Temple began to wane. Their memories of exile began to fade. As all sinful human beings do – as you and I always do – they fell into old bad habits of idolatry and corruption. Would they have to go through it all over again? Would they have to go through suffering and exile all over again?

No. Not this time. Because, from the very beginning, God had something better in mind. They thought Jeremiah's prophecy had been fulfilled when they returned from exile. But there was so much more that God had planned.

God planned to make his home with them. Not in some vague spiritual sense that they could easily ignore and forget. But in the flesh and blood presence of His Son on earth. Born of a virgin in Bethlehem.

A living breathing person. Who taught God's Word and obeyed God's Laws and shared God's grace. A person who you could love or you could hate. But you could not ignore him. And you could not forget him.

Because he was willing to do anything to make his home with his people. He was willing to give his very life so that you might know without a doubt that God will not abandon you. No matter how you've sinned. No matter what you've said or thought or done.

That same person has come to us as well. He has made his home with us. He has made his home in our homes, every time we read God's Word. He has made his home in our church, every time we receive his Body and Blood. God is with us. He is here. In our hearts and minds. Because we have been baptized with his Spirit.

So now, we are Judah, and we have been saved. We are Jerusalem, and we will dwell securely. We are called by this name: The Lord is our righteousness.

Today we read in our Gospel lesson about the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But that's what Advent is every year. It's when we celebrate God's triumphal entry into this earth as a child. His triumphal entry into our hearts through Word and Sacrament.

And, finally, his triumphal entry on the last day. When he will execute justice and righteousness on the land. When God will make his home on earth in yet another way. In a visible, glorious way. And all God's people – past, present, and future – saints above and saints below – will gather around his throne. And we will be home for all eternity. Amen.