

A HIGHWAY TO HOME  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
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Isaiah 35:1-10

When I was in the fifth grade I was in a school choir that met for an hour after school once a week. On those late days, I would get home by catching a city bus, in the days when even moderate-sized cities had buses.

One late afternoon I stood on the street corner when a bus pulled up, and I failed to notice that it was the wrong bus. It was just a small thing. I was supposed to catch something like the West End #1, and this was the West End #2. But after I had gotten on and ridden for awhile, I noticed that the difference between the #1 and #1 bus was enough to carry me quite a distance from my home. It wasn't getting any closer, but instead was heading farther and farther away. The only thing I could think to do was to get off and walk.

It was twilight by the time I started my trek. It was unsettling to walk through strange neighborhoods, and hear strange dogs barking as I passed by. I passed other houses where lights were on and people could be seen inside, but I kept on, because those were not my home.

The sun had set, and the sky was changing in color from a bright vermilion to yellow and finally to a vivid violet before giving way to complete darkness, just as I entered our familiar neighborhood. And finally, I crested a small ridge, and there was our home—nothing fancy, just a little ranch style house. The windows were ablaze with light. I knew my mother would be there cooking supper. Strangely, I don't remember actually walking in the house. What I remember was coming over that hill and seeing the house with its lights and warmth, and feeling an inexpressible sense of relief, which I remember clearly now a half century later, that I was home.

Home—there is no more beautiful word in the English language. Home, the place where you belong, where you can be yourself. There's no place better to be than home.

Fred Craddock tells of flying to a speaking engagement in Oklahoma City. He sat on the plane next to a couple, and found out that they were returning from a wonderful trip to Europe. Fred said he asked which place had been their favorite. “Oh, the Alps,” replied the wife. “Those mountains were absolutely beautiful.” As they touched down in Oklahoma City, she pointed his camera out the window and took a couple of pictures. Fred asked about it: “You’ve been to the Alps, and you’re taking a picture of Oklahoma?” “Of course,” she replied. “It’s home.”<sup>1</sup>

And it’s Christmas, or almost. “There’s no place like home for the holidays.” We will do just about anything to get home for the holidays. We will endure security checkpoints at the airport and bad weather on the highways to get home, or to have those we love come home to us.

Preacher and author David MacClennan, writing 40 years ago, tells of a time when he was a young preacher living in the Boston area, and was invited to engage in a debate with none other than Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher and opponent of Christianity. As they were conversing before the event, the old man mentioned that he must leave for England that night. MacClennan asked if there was an emergency that made it necessary for him to return so quickly. Lord Russell looked surprised: “No emergency. It’s just that a person likes to be home for Christmas.” Here was a man who had rejected Christian faith, but who at Christmas wanted to go home.<sup>2</sup>

The promise of Isaiah 35 is of returning home. Home—what must that simple word have meant to people who had lived in defeat and exile. Home—how they had dreamed of returning. Here is the promise: a highway is going to be built that they can walk on to return home. They didn’t even know that you could build a road through such a trackless waste, but this is going to be an interstate highway. Here is what is promised: No marauders, no lions, no danger. Here is what is promised: The redeemed of the Lord shall travel on it. Here is what is promised: They will return to Zion with singing, because they are filled with joy. Of course—they are coming home.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*. Edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> David A. MacClennan, *Sermons from Thanksgiving to Easter*. (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1968), p. 28.

It is such a great promise because we know how precious it is to be home. And it is great, because we know how often our world tries to pull us away from home. A famine strikes, and refugees have to leave their home to find something to eat. You lose your job, and you have to uproot your family and move away from home, because you've got to go where the jobs are. We think of homeless people in this season whose home, such as it is, will be an urban shelter shared with other people. We think of those who have argued with family members so that they're estranged, no longer talking, and they will not be together this Christmas. We think of those for whom Christmas will be just another day, and thoughts of home are but distant memories.

No wonder we think of soldiers in this season. Not only are they in harm's way, but they are far from home in the season when people are at home. One soldier in Iraq sent this email back home:

If it weren't for the Army uniforms and the constant noise of helicopters taking off and landing, . . . and the rockets exploding and the controlled blasts shaking the windows and the *thump, thump, thump* sound of the Apache gunships shooting their 30mm.guns in the middle of the night, and the heat and the cold, and the hero missions and the body bags and the stress, . . . and the worst: the constant pang of home, the longing for family, the knowledge that life is rolling past you like an unstoppable freight train, an inevitable force, reinforcing the desire for something familiar, the longing for something beautiful, for something safe, to be somewhere safe, with love and laughter and poetry and cold lemonade and clean sheets—if it weren't for all that, Iraq would be just like home. Almost.<sup>3</sup>

The opposite of home, in one way of thinking of it, is fear: fear of the unfamiliar, fear of danger that is out there, fear of not being able to be yourself, of having to pretend, because you're not at home. It's enough to make your hands weak and your knees knock. In those times the promise of scripture comes: "Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God . . . who will come to save you."

In these days leading up to Christmas, we cannot think of these words without also thinking of Jesus. Jesus, who was born far from home. Jesus the wanderer, who had nowhere to lay his head. Jesus, who was finally crucified outside the city, far from home. He became a homeless wanderer, so that he might give us the promise of home.

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<sup>3</sup> "Soldiers' Stories." *The New Yorker*, June 12, 2006, p. 124.

Remember his words: “In my Father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you.” We know that however much we love our earthly homes, that finally it will be death itself that will separate us from home and from those we love. But now Jesus says that not even death itself has power over us. We have a home prepared for us, where no one can take us away. The old cliché in the obituaries actually has it right. “He has gone home to be with the Lord.” The final promise is not death but life, not fear but home.

The promise of scripture is that we will return home. Of course there is joy, for there is nothing better than going home. Can’t you see them—the redeemed of the Lord returning home? They have been ransomed by God. And they are singing, singing for all they’re worth, singing for joy.

They’re all there. “No traveler, not even fools shall be led astray.” Don’t you love that? You may be such a fool that you are not be able to read a map right side up. You may be such a fool that you don’t ever stop to ask directions. Or a fool that gets on the wrong bus and ends up on the wrong side of town. Or a fool that has gotten into such an argument with people you love that now you’re estranged from them and can’t go home again. Not even fools shall be led astray. They’re on their way home, too.

Can’t you see them? You’re among them, you know, and so am I. This promise is for you and me, friends. Home, a place to come home to. That’s what Jesus does. It is his gospel word. He goes to prepare a place for us, and we will be at home. †