

<Read text: Is 65:17-25>

What do you think of when you hear the word “home”? Perhaps, like me, the first thing to jump into your mind is not the place you live now, but rather the place you grew up. Where you were raised with the rest of your family and spent your formative years. Perhaps you do think of your current residence. Or maybe it was one you had before along the journey of your life. But maybe more than all that, what really comes to mind is the feelings that the idea of “home” brings out. It may not have been perfect, but “home” tends to carry with it a sense of peace and security, a place where you can feel safe, where you know you won’t be hurt. A place where you can rest comfortably at the end of the day and let the stress go.

But maybe home has never meant that for you. Or maybe your home doesn’t mean that anymore. How much does it take for our sense of home to be compromised? A break-in, a burglary and suddenly our castle doesn’t feel so secure anymore. A vicious fight with the people we live with, and the calm and peace is lost. We can spend a lot of time and money then on an effort to reclaim that sense of home. But whatever methods we use, they’re never perfect and we’re only ever fooling ourselves to think that we really do have a place in this life that we can feel totally secure and at peace. There will always be something that can shatter the illusion.

In many ways, our whole life follows a similar pattern. We want our lives to have that same sort of feeling to them. We want them to be easy and carefree, we want them to have a sense of peace and security to them. I’m not saying we don’t want excitement or challenges, but that in whatever way we come to define it, we want life to be enjoyable. And life here can be very enjoyable. We each find our own set of things that give us that joy in this life; whether it’s growing a family or spending time with best friends, spreading out on a beach somewhere, the lazy comfort of books and TV or the satisfaction of working with your own hands. There’s a lot about this life we can enjoy. And we should, that’s why God has given us the joys he has. They are all blessings from him and they are all blessings we should enjoy with a thankful heart.

The problem, as always, is when the gift starts to outshine the giver. That is, when the things we enjoy in this life become all we have to hold on to. They become the driving purpose behind all we do and our reason for getting up in the morning. Everything we work for, everything we do gets bent around to this end of wanting more of whatever earthly pleasure it is that we enjoy so much. For some people, it’s not even any one thing. For some it’s simply this life they get attached to. They like the things here, they like being here and don’t really believe that anything else is going to be better and so they cling to this life with such ferocity, refusing to let it go even under the most extreme circumstances.

When we get too attached to this life or just too attached to any one thing in it, well that’s often when our Father steps in and tries to loosen our grip a little. This life is temporary, it is not where we are meant to be. It is not our home. And the Father will often do or allow whatever he needs to in order to remind us of that. In love he may try to shatter our sense of security and comfort in order to “wake us up” as it were and see our lives as they really are. This is not the reason behind all pains or hurts we suffer in this life, but it is something we should keep in mind as we endure them.

Because as much as we might become enamored of this life here, it is not perfect. It is not even safe and secure. There are plenty of things here to hurt us. And not all of them come at God’s direction. It’s all a natural consequence of living in a world corrupted with sin. Trying to make your home here, trying to feel safe and secure is like trying to bed down in soft hay mixed with broken glass. Sin throws its weight around the planet in what seems like ever-increasing amounts of natural disasters. Earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, hurricanes and the like all swoop in out of nowhere and destroy the safe and comfortable lives so carefully assembled over the years. Sin eats away at our own bodies, causing pains where there shouldn’t be, either mystifying the smartest of doctors or forcing us to swallow a pharmacy of pills each day just to feel “normal”. People we care about depart and people who don’t even know us hurt us. We even regularly let ourselves down. Our regular pledges to “do better” at this or that problem or vice...they last for a while and then we do it again.

The sin living in us seeks to destroy our hope and our morale. All of it tries to ruin our sense of comfort and security in this life. And if we’ve become focused on the joys of this life, if that was why we were living and why we did everything we did, then that gets really depressing when it’s taken away. If we’ve tried to make our home here, we’re always going to be let down, and let down all the sharper because we deluded ourselves into thinking it was possible to be happy and comfortable here forever. Not that we would ever suggest we’re going to live forever, but in the prime of our lives, it always feels like it’s going to go on at least one day more just like the day before. But it doesn’t.

Sometimes these little breaks happen in ways we don't even notice. Just minor things that upset the balance and we autocorrect by doing something to fix them. And on it goes for some people. But sometimes the minor things pile up or a major thing comes along that really does some noticeable damage to our lives. Some just redouble their efforts to rebuild, not recognizing the relative futility of it. Others, when they have to face this shattering of hope that sin causes, they do just give up. They essentially sit down in the dust and complain about everything that's gone wrong for them in this life. Hope is lost, and there is no point in being happy about anything ever again. Whether you are wasting time trying to keep a "perfect" life in balance or you just give up all hope, neither outcome is really desirable. Either you give up and realize you can't win, or the same is still true but you delude yourself into thinking it's still possible.

Which is why, as Christians, we should rejoice in the fact that neither of these fates need to be ours.

We do not have to get lost in the delusion that this life can be our home, but at the same time we do not have to give up our hope because this is true. We have a home and it is so much better than anything we could manage to piece together here. We are exactly what we are celebrating this Sunday. We are the saints triumphant. You are a saint triumphant. Now the word "saint" has been so misused since it was originally given to us, that we really need to talk about that for a moment. A saint is not someone special that is super-holy or something like that. You don't have to be hand-picked by Christ during his time on earth and you don't have to be specially recognized by the church after a lifetime of service and performing a few miracles. Saint literally just means "holy".

That is you.

No, really!

By faith we take hold of what the blood of Christ offers us, full and free forgiveness of sins. In fact, God's word states it even stronger than that. Sins aren't just forgiven, they are forgotten. They are so far away it is as though they never existed. And so all of your doubts about God's love for you and any of your foolishness in getting stuck on this life and the things of this world instead of God...it is as though all of that never existed! Christ was sacrificed in your place. His blood was shed so that your sins would be paid. God sees you through the blood of Christ and that is how you are sanctified, made a saint, made holy. You are a saint. Set free from sin, you can serve God in peace and joy in this life, knowing that whatever mistakes you make along the way, you are already forgiven. God sees you as holy, as a saint. We strive to live up to that standard but not because meeting it makes us better or earns us something new, we do it simply because we can.

Jesus died to make this possible for us. But he didn't stay that way. The victory was won on the cross and he rose from the dead in triumph to prove it to us. Jesus, firstborn from the dead is the proof to us that we too will rise when the time comes. And we will rise in victory. We win, not because of our own struggle, but because God has won the victory for us and given us the spoils of that conflict. The treasure won? Our true home, heaven. Just like Isaiah does his best to describe it here in our reading today.

That is our triumph. That is our victory. All the pains and worries and troubles of this life will not follow us there. In fact, even more than that, they will be forgotten. No memories filled with regrets to haunt us, no new pains to confront us when we start each new day. That feeling we spend our lives trying to create, the place of peace and comfort, happiness and security, that is what our heaven is. It's going to be a true delight, a true joy. Not like the ones on earth that get interrupted from within and without. Not like the ones here that warm our hearts for a bit and then fade and die. Real comfort and joy from the sun of our God forever. When that is the home you recognize as yours and when that is what your eyes are fixed on looking forward to, there's no reason to waste time trying to make this life "perfect" and there's certainly no reason to get depressed because this life didn't live up to expectations.

For some of us, this joy may be a blessing coming soon to us. For others, we may have to wait a while. And the determining factor isn't always age, you know. But whenever and however it comes for us, it is something to look forward to no matter how dark things get here. There really is a light at the end of the tunnel for us all. It's the light of our Savior Christ, who died and rose from the dead to win us the eternal victory. To make us holy and earn us the victory of heaven. That's where we're going, that's the destination of this life. We're not here to nest down forever, but rather just to do what we have to in order to get by until we can go home.

There are things for each of us to do in the meantime. We shouldn't get our heads stuck in the clouds staring at what is to come and neglecting everything else. But we should always keep an eye on where we are going, so that we remember where the course of our life is headed. Whatever darkness surrounds us here, it won't last. Whatever pain stabs at you day by day, it won't last. The darkness will melt in the light of eternal life and the pain will be left behind. Let that be your hope and comfort while you walk your remaining steps through this earth on your way to your true home. Amen.