



“Homecoming 2009”

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Jeremiah 31:7-9*

When you hear the word “Homecoming,” what comes to mind? Do your thoughts drift back to high school or college days? Mine certainly do. My clearest memories of homecoming are probably from my freshman year in high school, which was Homecoming 1977, in Reinbeck, Iowa.

Homecoming was a big deal when I was a growing up in Iowa. I realize that in some larger communities today schools celebrate homecoming with each athletic team, so that there are multiple homecomings throughout the year. But in small town Iowa, homecoming was only celebrated once a year in association with football, and it was about as big of a deal as Christmas for us teenagers.

The week leading up to the homecoming football game was huge. The Saturday beforehand, each class was assigned a merchant’s window on Main Street to paint with a theme that conveyed our school spirit. We stirred Ivory® liquid soap into tempera paints, so that we wouldn’t damage the merchants’ property. The following Saturday we had to remove all the paint, to avoid the wrath of the principal who threatened to eliminate the tradition from next year’s celebration if any of the merchants were unhappy with our clean up, or lack of clean up as the case may have been.

Our window paintings, like our float designs, were evaluated by a panel of judges who awarded cash prizes to the top three winners. All proceeds were banked by the winning classes or clubs to fund future group events like Prom, our senior class trips, and our gift to the school when we graduated.

On the Monday before the big game, the seniors voted during study hall for the homecoming queen’s court, and then we voted again on Thursday for the queen from among the six semifinalists. The winning candidate’s name was announced during the half-time show at the Friday night football game, and the queen and her escort danced the first dance at the homecoming ball after the game.

Members of the student government chose a theme for each day of the week leading up to the homecoming game, to bolster school spirit. These themes typically had dress

codes associated with them. My senior year, for example, it was decided that we would all wear clothes from a different decade each day, starting with the 1940s.

This meant that we kids had to rummage through our grandparents' and parents' attics and closets to find clothes that we otherwise would not have been caught dead wearing. On Monday, for example, there were a lot of mink stoles (the kinds with the heads still on, with their mouths clasped to their tails) and wool derbies from the '40s.

On Tuesday, most of the girls were wearing their mother's poodle skirts and the boys wore their Levis cuffed up like their dads used to wear them. Tie-died T-shirts, bandanas, and beatnik clothes were big on Wednesday, and hip-hugger jeans and mid-drift tops made a reprise on Thursday. Everyone wore dress up cloths and sported the school colors, which were orange and black, on Friday.

The marching band practiced during music class and lunch hour for the homecoming parade and half-time show. After school, we built our class floats on farmers' hayracks in warehouse space loaned to us by the local merchants.

In hindsight, it seems that the freshman classes typically placed highest among the awardees, because they took the festivities the most seriously. It was pretty much downhill after that.

II

This past week I experienced another kind of homecoming. Many of you heard last Sunday that I was called home for a family funeral. I left right after worship for my Uncle Lynn's funeral and arrived back home about an hour before the service, which was on Monday.

My uncle suffered a fatal heart attack while driving his truck to pick up my aunt from the grocery store. His death was quite a shock to the family. The day before he died, he was out combining corn and the next day he was gone.

My homecoming for the funeral was brief, but a reminder of the importance of family, church, and small town solidarity that were a familiar comfort to me and to other mourners.

It's harvest season back home. Monday was one of the first decent days the farmers had in weeks to harvest corn and soybeans. The harvest is behind schedule on account of all the rain and snow that's fallen recently, yet the church was packed. It was packed with farmers who should have been in the fields. It was packed with old friends of my parents with whom they had farmed for decades. The church was packed with distant relatives, with old friends and neighbors, and with the people who had taught my Sunday school classes, cooked my school lunches, and drove my school bus.

The kitchen was staffed by members of LCW (Lutheran Church Women) who made the same Jell-o salads, scalloped potatoes, and Swedish meatballs that they had made for my grandparents' funerals, my father's funeral, and all the funerals before that one. We ate off of the same plates that we used at church dinners when I was child, and we sat in the same chairs and in the same fellowship hall where my sister and I used to gather for Sunday school and Bible school assemblies, and where we rehearsed for children's choir and handbell choir when we were young.

Not much has changed back in my home town—especially not the way people do funerals, or the way that they quietly surround and support each other in times of grief and loss.

While people often speak poorly of churches and small towns on account of their conventions and traditions, in times like these, familiar sites and rituals can be a comfort.

As people started to leave the church after lunch and the buzz of the crowd began to die down, I started to decompress from the travel and the events of the day, and I felt grateful for the church of my childhood.

I also felt grateful for Eden Church knowing that so often this campus and you have been the place and the people who have provided numerous homecomings for the children and grandchildren of this congregation, and those who have moved across town and across the country, and those who have come home primarily for weddings, anniversaries, and funerals. Often times, you have been the ones standing at the doors handing out the bulletins, lighting the candles, singing the music, baking the cakes, pouring the coffee, wiping off the tables, sweeping up the crumbs, and shutting out the lights.

In times of grief for others, you have provided the homecoming celebration for so many who have traveled through the Valley of the Shadow of Death to arrive here, and you have provided them with comfort and care. For the many ways named and unnamed that you have cared for others—especially for people you've never known before—I have always been grateful and have always been proud to be your pastor.

III

There are many different kinds of homecomings. Football games and family funerals are just two of the types that we might name.

The Old Testament reading from Jeremiah today describes another kind of homecoming. It is the homecoming of the exiles from Babylon to Zion as envisioned by the prophet.

To appreciate the power of this passage, it is important to know that the people who heard the prophet's words for the first time had lived in exile most (if not all) of their

lives. They believed that their exile was God's punishment for the unfaithfulness of their forebears. They did not expect a pardon or release. Had such an eventuality come to pass, few, if any, would have known the way home.

Mindful of the prophet's audience, imagine now being an exile in Babylon, and hearing Jeremiah say these words:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a parent to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Imagine what good news this message proclaimed to the exiles.

Now imagine that Jesus came to proclaim this good news, not only to Israel, but to all people—even to you—so that regardless of what your experience of exile may be—either literal or figurative—you might know that God had something better in mind for you and your family than poverty, infirmity, or expatriation.

Imagine, too, that your future is not dependent upon whether you won or lost a football game, whether you made it home for a particular family event, or whether you or I earned or deserved something better. Instead, imagine that your future depended only on God's grace and mercy.

Imagine that good news, Jeremiah says. Imagine that good news, because it's true. Imagine that good news and get ready to celebrate, because the homecoming festivities that God has in store for us are not dependent upon our actions, but upon God's grace, and that's something to celebrate.

Regardless of whatever hardship we have experienced in the past, regardless of what suffering we may experience now, God has something better in store for us. We shall overcome. Not because of our worthiness, but because of God's grace. Let the festivities begin. Amen.