

BRING THEM HOME

Several weeks ago I was talking with a friend about this morning's sermon. I knew it was going to be our Welcoming Sunday. It would be the first day of church school and choir and our annual pancake breakfast. There would be all the hoopla and excitement of our return from the beach and summer vacations. We'd all be together for the first time in nine or ten weeks.

"Sort of a homecoming Sunday," said my friend.

"Right," I replied. "And it's supposed to be a joyful day."

"But . . ." he said, sensing there was more.

"But it's also September 11th—and I don't know how to combine the joy of homecoming with the lingering sorrow of 9-11."

"Oh," he said, "I see what you mean. It's homecoming Sunday, but four years ago some people never came home."

And that was it—precisely. How would we be able to celebrate coming home, how could we be so callous as to be joyful on a day like this? How would we be able to do a proper Welcoming Sunday on the anniversary of a day when over 3,000 folks left for work in the morning and never came home that night? How could we celebrate on a day when toxic fumes and dust so contaminated part of our greatest city that thousands more had to move out of apartments and businesses, many never to return? How could we celebrate coming home on September 11th?

As this day drew closer it didn't get better. The reports out of Iraq of record numbers of casualties were daily reminders that with each explosion, with each attack by the insurgency, more American soldiers and many more Iraqis, would never come home as this seemingly endless war drags on and on.

And my sense of despair and concern wasn't helped by a photo I saw one hot August day in the *Times* of an Asian woman, Indonesian as I remember, standing midst fallen palms and debris strewn across the beach. She looked worn down and defeated. The caption said that she had lived in a village on this very spot that had been destroyed by the tsunami last winter and that neither she nor her fellow villagers had moved back, none of them had returned to their ancestral home, because they were afraid the ocean might rise up again.

And then of course, just about two weeks ago, all hell broke loose on the Gulf Coast as Hurricane Katrina slammed into Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama, destroying whole towns, and eventually, when the levees gave way, one of the truly great American cities. Above a five column wide, full-color, front page picture of submerged house as far as the eye could see, the headline in the *Times* practically shouted: *New Orleans Is Inundated As Two Levees Fail; Much of Gulf Coast Is Crippled, Toll Rises.* (New York Times, 8-30-05, A-1)

With each passing day the news got worse. Hundreds of thousands would need to be resettled, first in make shift shelters in churches and sports arenas and airport baggage claim rooms, and in time in motels and apartments far from home. Tens and tens of thousands would be moved to Texas and Arkansas and even as far away as New Haven, Connecticut. Some estimates predicted that as many as ten thousand may have died, and the numbers who are displaced is well in excess of half-a-million. No jobs. No schools. No church buildings. No houses or stores. Nothing but death and destruction and water—lots of water. But that not even suitable for drinking.

Environmental writer and researcher John Barry, from New Orleans's Tulane University had to leave his home and his job. Reflecting on it all early last week he wrote: "I called my home in New Orleans to listen to the phone ring. I didn't call for messages, knowing that without power the answering machine had not taken any. I called to connect to my home. No neighbors remained to talk to. The few who had remained through the storm and through the first part of the week had finally gone. Listening to the ring, imagining it echoing through the silent house, its sound waves caressing so much that I loved and so much of my life, I was reluctant to hang up. It seemed as if hanging up meant abandoning my home and my city, as if I were holding onto it, and hanging up meant letting it all . . . go." (New York Times, 9-4-05, 4-1)

9-11, Iraq, the tsunami, Katrina—and the list goes on and on. Millions around the world are refugees who wander far from their native lands because of war and terror and natural disasters. Most will never go home. Most, like John Barry, have had to let it all go.

In light of all that—how, I wondered, could we possibly celebrate our coming home?

But then it began to come together for me. The words of a television reporter last Sunday night, a picture on the front page of the Connecticut *Post* last Monday, and memories on Tuesday of the story of ancient Israel, all brought me to my senses—all reminded me that not only *could* we celebrate homecoming, we *must* celebrate it. Let me explain.

As I sat watching the evening news last Sunday I was touched by a story about how people's religious convictions had helped them cope with Katrina. I was especially stirred by one of the reporter's observations. "One of the few things," he said, "that

many of [the victims] carried out with them was their faith.” (*World News Tonight*, ABC, 9-4-05) Their faith, their ability to see past the death and destruction and believe that in and through God, love would prevail, and the wrongs would be set right.

Then Monday morning, as I pulled the *Post* out of its blue plastic bag, I opened up to a striking picture on page one. It showed the Rev. Harold Roberts, rector of the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi, dressed in his robes, with prayer book in hand, standing in front of a few bare steel girders and the shell of a building. The caption read: “Services were held outdoors on the site of the church, which, along with much of the rest of the city, was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.” (*Connecticut Post*, 9-5-05, A-1) Despite the destruction, the faithful souls of Church of the Redeemer still gathered to worship last Sunday.

And then Tuesday, as I pondered all these things, I suddenly remembered the story of the exile. I suddenly remembered how in the 6th century BCE the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem; how like Louisianan levees the walls of that ancient city were breached, and how, like the waters of Lake Poncitrain, the Babylonian troops flooded Jerusalem and laid it to waste. Homes, businesses, and even the Temple itself were destroyed. And that city’s inhabitants were evacuated, forced to march 800 miles across the desert to Babylon, where they were held captive for over sixty years.

Most of them never returned to their homes, most of them never saw Jerusalem again. But in their exile they recognized they still had their faith. And they realized that it was more enduring than houses and city walls. More enduring than the Temple itself. They virtually reinvented their religious practices, writing down much of what they had learned about God and coming to rely even more heavily on the written word. They created centers for learning called synagogues. And their faith was sustained. And out of that faith grew hope, hope that one day they would return to Jerusalem. Hope that one day their houses and businesses and the Temple would all be rebuilt. For their faith was in God—the source of all that is good.

Their faith in God was beautifully expressed over and over again in those writings—in the Psalms, in several of the prophetic books and most notably in the book of Isaiah, much of which was written while they were in Babylon. Indeed, speaking of the future of Jerusalem, the prophet declares:

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt
you shall raise up the
foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the
repairers of the breach,
the restorers of streets to dwell in.
(Isaiah 58:12)

And as I read and prayed and pondered it became clear to me. If the survivors of Katrina can be buoyed by their faith; if Harold Roberts and the folk of the Church of the Redeemer can worship in the midst of Biloxi, if the ancient Jews could hold out hope while living in exile, then you and I can celebrate coming home, not only can, but must!

The Sunday Katrina hit Linda and I were on vacation in Provincetown on the Cape. There is no UCC church right in town, so we decided to go to a Methodist Church.

It's a fairly small congregation—there weren't more than seventy-five of us at the service. But we were made to feel welcome. The couple behind us greeted us warmly as we waited for things to start, and the pastor stopped at our pew on his way forward and said hello. The church bulletin informed us "our church lovingly welcomes all people into our fellowship." The words were italicized and underlined, so that we couldn't miss them!

The congregation hosts the town's soup kitchen—and the calendar listed AA meetings everyday. As the choir came forward it was clear than among the five women and four men there was a gay couple. In the front pew there was a young woman with Downs Syndrome, and when the pastor asked for announcements, she excitedly shared about a whale watch she'd just been on. "It came out of the water like this," she said as she motioned with her hands. Through the rest of the service, whenever it was time to sing a hymn, she'd loudly tell the congregation the page number. No one seemed to be bothered.

At the end of the announcements the pastor called a couple forward who were celebrating their fiftieth anniversary—and after everyone applauded, he offered a brief prayer of blessing.

Later, before the pastoral prayer, he invited prayer requests. There were the expected sorts of requests: for folks who were sick or hospitalized. One young man told us he had been working seven days a week over the summer to make sure he had enough money for his college tuition in the fall, and that it had still been short, but "Thank you God," he said, "I just got a scholarship." Others shared their requests.

Finally a woman in her fifties spoke up.

"I'd like us to pray for my son and his family. They just moved into their new house in Biloxi."

We did, of course, and for all others in the path of the storm.

I have no idea how that woman's son fared, whether or not his new house is standing, whether or not he and his family are safe and sound—but I do know this. His mother is being lovingly supported, for her church clearly has become a home.

A home for two gay men and a developmentally disabled young woman and a young fellow struggling to pay for college and an older married couple and recovering alcoholics and folks who need to be fed.

And it has become home for a worried mother.

And that is worth celebrating.

And so too is our coming home.

It's not that we celebrate the loss of life on 9-11. We don't, most of us still mourn deeply. It's not that we feel any sense of happiness about the ongoing violence and bloodshed in Iraq. We don't, most of us pray that it comes to an end soon. It's not that we are smug about the tsunami being half-a-world away and Katrina way down south and that we at least were spared. We are not; most of us are humbled by it all.

No our celebration is not any of that. Rather what we celebrate, what brings us great joy, is the simple but profound truth that in our home coming this Sunday we are reminded once again that our faith is in a God who loves not only those of us here, but also those in New York and Iraq, those in Indonesia and New Orleans and Gulfport and Biloxi. What we celebrate is that that same God has called us to create a home for one another right here at Saugatuck. A home where the young can be nurtured and taught and the hungry fed. A home where the addicted can find recovery and the broken made whole. A home where the old can be honored and the grieving given comfort. A home where we can all be strengthened so that we might go out from here ready to love and serve our neighbors. Ready to repair the breach and restore the streets.

That, my sisters and brothers, is what we not only can, but must celebrate. That is why we can say with real joy, welcome home. Welcome home.

**Amen
John H. Danner**