

HOMeward BOUND

John 14:1-15

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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Some of you may have seen the movie *Homeward Bound*, which came out some years ago. It's a wonderful, true story about three animals---two dogs and a cat---who found their way home in spite of almost insurmountable odds. Their family had moved, and had taken the animals to live with a friend hundreds of miles away. But the animals did not know that the family had moved, and thought that they had been left behind accidentally.

So the animals escaped from their new home and began an incredible journey, a journey which took them over high mountains and barren wastelands, across raging rivers and precipitous waterfalls, and through dangerous territory populated by wild animals and humans who tried to catch them. But in their determination to get home, the animals overcame individual calamities of being pursued by a mountain lion, going over a waterfall, and being stuck in a deep well of mud. Surviving near-starvation and utter exhaustion, they finally staggered home to a joyous welcome from their family. Through all their difficulties, the animals knew they were homeward bound, and that's what kept them going.

We, too, are homeward bound. We are on a journey during this life, and our final destination is God's house, which is our true home. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus refers to God's house of many dwelling places, most of us probably assume that he is referring to heaven. And indeed this passage from John 14 is almost always read at funerals.

But there is an additional way of understanding Jesus' statement, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." According to New Testament scholar Gail O'Day, [in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke and John*, Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 740-741] this verse refers more to the relationship between God and Jesus---and by extension to us---than it does to any specific location or place. In other words, to live in God's house is to be in relationship with God---to be in a close, intimate relationship in which God is like a Parent, and we are the children. That relationship begins in this life and continues in the life to come.

And that relationship is permanent. The Greek word that is variously translated "dwelling places," "rooms," or "mansions," really refers to a permanent dwelling place, in contrast to any temporary dwelling. Whether thought of as heaven or as our relationship with God, God's house is our permanent home. It is to this permanent dwelling that we are homeward bound.

But on the way to our permanent home, we all experience many difficulties, much as the dogs and cat did in the movie *Homeward Bound*. Some of us are struggling to ford raging rivers of illness, or stress, or marriage or family problems. Others of us are trying to cross a barren wasteland of loneliness, or the loss of a loved one, or broken dreams, or spiritual drought. Still others of us may be confronting high mountains of unpaid bills and

insufficient income.

Some among us may be approaching the precipice of burn-out, or depression, or alcoholism. Some are doing battle with demons from the past, such as an abusive parent, or a mistake made as a teenager, or an unwise choice that cannot be undone. Others are grappling with people in the present who seek to lead us astray by offering us falsehoods instead of truth. Some are stuck in deep wells of anger, or bitterness, or prejudice, or fear. We are homeward bound, but our journey through life may seem so difficult, and beset with so many problems, that we may wonder whether we will ever make it home.

Many of you will recognize the name Ann Weems. She is a well-known Presbyterian poet and liturgist, and the author of seven books. What you may not know about Ann Weems is that 26 years ago her son Todd was killed on his 21st birthday. His mother poured out her grief in 50 psalms of lament. I want to read to you her Lament Psalm Thirty-six:

*O God, help me get home!
I am lost
in the forest of fear.
I have no map
except the memory
of your word.
Captive to my fear,
I am frozen
in my anguish,
afraid to move
in any direction.
Which way, O God?
Which way?
Which way leads back home?*

*O God, find me!
Do not sleep
until I am safely back
by your fireside,
for I shake night and day
with no defense
against the cold,
pelting pain.
I have no sanctuary
against the whipping winds
of fright.
I tremble unshielded
from the hail of suffering.
The trees of terror
grab at me
from every side.*

*Find me, O caring God,
before night falls,
because I have no light.
Take up your lantern
and look for me
before I die of fright.*

*I will nestle in the hope
of your coming.
You will find me
and carry me
to the path
that leads home.
I will no longer fear,
for you, O God,
you are my home!*

...Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster
John Knox Press, 1995, pp. 72-73

When life really gets tough and we wonder whether we will make it, it helps to remember that God is always there beside us, giving us the strength to cope and the energy to carry on. We are homeward bound, and we know where we are going.

When Jesus told his disciples that he was going away to prepare a place for them, and that they knew the way to this place, Thomas protested and said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus then explained to them that he is the way, and the truth, and the life. Jesus is the way for us Christians to go, the way that will lead us home. Jesus is also the truth that will set us free from our doubts and fears, from our worries and concerns. And he is the life that is both abundant and eternal. If we follow in Jesus' way, and live by the truth he teaches us, then we will have life in our permanent home.

But what does it mean to follow in Jesus' way and to live by his truth? In the last verse of our lesson from John 14, Jesus tells us what it means to follow him. He says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." If we love him.... If we love him because he suffered and died on the cross, because he redeemed us from our sin, because he heals our brokenness and restores us to wholeness, because he gives us abundant and eternal life, because he rose from the dead and offers us that same victory over death, because he has gone on ahead of us to prepare a place for us in heaven. If we love him, then we will keep his commandments.

With God's help, we will keep Jesus' commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We will keep Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. We will keep Jesus' commandment to love one another and to love even our enemies. If we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments. And in loving him and keeping his commandments, we will find the way home, for we are indeed homeward bound.

Being homeward bound is like coming home to a loving father or mother from whom we have been separated by many miles. Three weeks from today is Mother's Day. Some of you may travel a long distance to go home to be with your mother, or some of you mothers may have your children coming from a long way away to be with you. Others of us will be going home only in memories of past homecomings. Whatever our personal situation, most of us know what it feels like to be homeward bound in order to reconnect with our mother and to be welcomed at the door with open arms and a loving embrace.

It is like that when we connect or reconnect with God. God opens the door of the house, greets us warmly and lovingly with open arms, and says to us, "Welcome home, my child!"

Some years ago, a woman was giving birth to her second child, when she began hemorrhaging. It was so bad that she was not expected to live. In fact, she overheard one of the nurses saying, "She's not going to make it. How do you suppose her husband will manage alone with a new baby and a three-year-old?" The other nurse in the room replied, "We need to be careful what we say; she might be able to hear us."

And then the woman felt as though someone were sitting behind her with loving arms wrapped around her. She felt warm and secure in that embrace. And then she felt this person say to her, "Don't listen to them. It's not your time yet. You're going to be fine." And three days later she was released from the hospital and went home. And years later, she is still fine and is an active member of one of my former congregations. In that hospital room that day, she experienced first-hand the loving embrace of God. And she can say with Ann Weems, "I will no longer fear, for you, O God, you are my home!"

God welcomes us home and embraces us lovingly. Thanks be to God!