

Lent 4 (2025)

Once I was at the bedside of a woman not long for this world. She kept crying out, “I want to go home.”

Her daughter leaned over the bed and said, “Mother, do you want to go to our house or Jesus’.”

Well, she didn’t know. She just kept crying out, “I want to go home.”

There is something warm and inviting about home, at least for those who grew up in a secure and supportive one.

For those who did, the word may well conjure up scenes of a dear old mother and dad, perhaps a fire on the hearth with a dog outstretched on a rug beside it and delicious odors coming from the kitchen.

It has been said that home is the place you can go when all other doors are shut. And surely there is much truth in that saying.

For some, the idea of home extends beyond the confines of where they sleep and eat to where they worship Sunday by Sunday. Church becomes an extension of the family home.

That was the way it was in my family when I was growing up. Still to this day, the thought of the people no less than the building brings feelings of warmth and security.

Ten years ago this year I was invited back to this church.

Sadly, the neighborhood had changed (a security guard was needed in the parking lot during service times) and those who continued to attend were getting older. Many had died, and few new ones were coming.

Rather than let the church go out with a whimper, it was decided to have a great service of thanksgiving to which all the ‘old folks’ were invited back. I guess I was among that number because I was contacted!

Around 400 showed up. A potluck followed.

It was a bitter-sweet occasion. It was wonderful seeing so many old friends, but it was also sad to see the building being closed, at least for that congregation.

Being there brought back memories of half a century. One of these memories was the day in 1963 when the new education building was opened. I remember walking up the stairs to my class in the primary department on that first Sunday. It was an exciting moment.

Fifty years later I found myself walking up those same stairs and going through rooms where I had sat as a boy. As I did, I could see

faithful teacher after teacher, as well as my fellow classmates.

But the thing that tugged at my heart strings the tightest was a desk in the hallway just outside the main church. There, my mother, who was the general secretary of the Sunday School, had sat. Her job was to record in a master ledger the attendance figures brought to her by representatives of the various departments.

I stopped and opened the door to a side compartment of this desk. There was the little blue Bakelite manual adding machine she had used Sunday by Sunday.

This building was our home, just as surely as our residence a mile down the road.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is “Mothering Sunday”.

This designation seems to have arisen from a phrase found in today's Epistle: "Jerusalem which is above . . . is the mother of us all."

In earlier times in England, it became the custom of young people who had moved away to return to their "mother church" on this Sunday.

Of course, on these occasions they would have visited their homes and mothers. Often, they would bring flowers, cakes and other gifts.

In many parts of the Anglican Communion, the tradition of honoring one's mother on Mothering Sunday continues.

You can be excused if you did not get a warm and fussy feeling as today's Epistle (again from which the name Mothering Sunday comes) was read. It is a dense passage. More than likely, you were left scratching your head asking, "What

in the world is Paul trying to say? /// Here is your answer.

Paul, speaking in the fashion of a rabbi, is using an allegory He is using this allegory to warn his readers – many whom were Gentiles – not to take on bits and pieces of the Jewish law which had been fulfilled in Christ . . . as indeed they were being urged to do by some false teachers.

In this allegory, Abraham's wife Sara's maid Hagar (along with her son Ishmael), represents those Judeans in Jerusalem who had not embraced Jesus as messiah.

As Hagar in the Old Testament story was a bondswoman, so in a sense they were slaves to a system which could not put them in a right relationship to God.

Allow me to expand that thought: The Law given by Moses instead of liberating people put a yoke around their necks.

It told people how they ought to live so as to please God but was powerless to bring about the righteousness it demanded.

Returning to Paul's allegory: Sara, Abraham's wife, and her son Isaac represent those who had received Jesus as messiah regardless of their ethnicity.

According to Paul's reckoning, they were the true Israel who were on their way home to the Jerusalem which is above.

Under the Old Covenant what marked people out as members of God's covenant family were such things as circumcision for the males, food laws and sabbaths.

No more. Now only one thing counts – faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. As Paul would go on to write in Romans 10:

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

Paul’s call to his original readers and indeed us is to live as free men and women.

Nevertheless, with freedom comes responsibility. We exercise our freedom by doing such things as:

Loving others in practical ways, being responsible stewards of our time and resources, using our bodies in Christ honoring ways, telling the truth, being honest in business, standing for justice, sharing the hope we have in Christ and living joyfully in world clouded by gloom and doom.

As we do these things, we must never lose sight that our true home is above. It is that city that, according to Revelation 21, will come down to earth at our Lord's Second Coming.

When confronted with the challenges of this present age, we do well to remember this and to cry out in the words of the hymnwriter:

Jerusalem, my happy home,
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Thy joys when shall I see?

A word of caution, however, is due here. In so saying, we are not abandoning this present world and the work God has given us to do in it. Let no one accuse us of being "pie in the sky" Christians.

Returning to the thought of home. The heavenly Jerusalem is worthy of our

consideration. Yet, at the same time, the homes of this age are not to be despised or forgotten.

Rather, they should be seen as signposts pointing to something better, something more beautiful and more permanent.

No one seems to have caught this hope with greater clarity than the venerable C.S. Lewis, who ends the very last of his Chronicles of Narnia with these words:

“All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

But, what about the time in the middle?
What about now?

It is here that today's Gospel comes into play. We are on a journey to our true home, just as were the children of Israel in the days of Moses. Their home was the Promised Land.

In scripture, we are reminded again and again that they were not alone on this journey. God was with them. He was their Provider. He sent down bread from heaven for their sustenance.

In today's Gospel we find a retelling of this Old Testament story, this time Jesus Himself being the One who provides the bread.

My concluding thought is that God continues to provide. He provides for our physical needs, as well as our spiritual. Allow me to pause here and ask: "What are your needs this morning? ////

Whatever they are know that the God we meet in Jesus knows and cares and is able to

provide for those needs. Turn those needs over to Him and leave them there.

What we find Jesus doing in the desert, taking, breaking and blessing bread might be thought of as a foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper. The same actions Jesus took that day He later took at the Last Supper.

Beyond that, the officiant at every communion service does the same.

What follows is that God's people are provided food for the journey as they make their way towards their true home, that Jerusalem which is above and the mother of us all.

Come to the Lord's Table this morning and discover for yourself God's gracious provisions . . . the compassion of Christ, the answers you have been looking for and the strength needed for the journey at hand.