

Homecoming - Making home as ‘temporary residents’ - Jer. 29:4-7; 1 Pet. 2:11-12; Matt. 6:25-34

I wonder what comes into your mind when you hear the word ‘home’? What patch of country or place appears? Who are you surrounded by? This morning, let’s explore this idea of making home wherever we find ourselves knowing that we’re always, as Peter writes, ‘temporary residents’ in this life.

‘To Feel at Home in a Place’

Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* tracks the orphan Jayber through his life. After a brief stint of trying to find his place out in the world, he returns to the small town of Port William on the Kentucky River, where he becomes the town barber. Here he remains until he moves late in life to a cabin late out of town on the edge of the river. When I read this book 10 years ago, one line hit me and has stayed with me, challenging me ever since. Before Jayber had consciously made the decision to move, he notices how he didn’t plant his garden that spring and did not replenish the coal pile when it ran low. He has subconsciously decided his time has come to an end at Port William. He observes:

To feel at home in a place, you have to have some prospect of staying there.

Last week Josh spoke of the intention needed to find our sense of home in the place of worship. This line challenges me to think with intention about how we live in a place. It challenges me because for the last 10 years I feel as if we have lived somewhat provisionally. I think this is a particular temptation of my generation. To not embrace a place, fully committing and putting down roots. Then years can fly by in a place and you never unpack all the boxes so to speak. Case in point: moving to Auckland to go to college, we were only going to be here for 3 years. That extended to 4, and now we’ve been here for nearly 8 years, in three houses—each place has felt provisional, temporary. Residing in a place without embracing it as home means we’re not fully *living* in that place. A sense of home depends on believing there is a future here in this place. Without that, we often hold a place and people at arm’s length. We don’t commit to a community, or we compare our current circumstances to our sense of home, that place, those people (real or imagined) that come to mind to you think of ‘home.’

Personal Relevance

I had planned to preach on this theme, without realising how relevant it would be for us these past two weeks. We tried to buy a home last week. We amazingly found a place that might work for us in the area and seemingly within budget. However, without going into all the details, what felt like something God was in very quickly came tumbling down around us, one thing impacting another like a house of cards, when we felt so close. Of course, we trust that God is in this story. However, it has sharpened the question: what does it look like to make a home in a place if your situation is provisional?

However, the reality is that all our lives and situations are precarious and provisional. As a renter there is a precariousness to a living situation, but this is true of all of us whatever our living situation. We all

currently live under the spectre of uncertainty, war, a weak economy, A.I. Then the personal twists and turns we all go through. Anything can upend our sense of security overnight. C. S. Lewis' essay *On Living in an Atomic Age* came to mind, where he responded to the question: how ought we live with the threat of nuclear war? He writes:

If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs.

In other words, do not live in anxiety, but cultivate lives of truth, beauty and goodness. Of fully aliveness. Of being non-anxious. Of resisting all that is distracting and soul-diminishing. I don't read this as permission to cocoon and just live a nice, domestic life. But rather to live fully human, fully alive in the face of all that might diminish us. Let's now turn to the wisdom of Scripture.

A letter to exiles

Our Old Testament reading this morning, to give some context, is a letter that the prophet Jeremiah writes to exiles who have been forcibly taken from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar, in the first of three major waves of deportation. All the other so-called prophets are giving a word of peace, that Babylon will never conquer Jerusalem, while Jeremiah is saying, surrender and perhaps the entire city won't be sacked and destroyed. Jeremiah has taken to wearing a wooden yoke as a symbol of the exile, while another prophet, Hananiah, breaks Jeremiah's yoke and declares that the exile will be no more than 2 years – so don't get too comfortable in Babylon. Jeremiah responds: Amen! I hope everything you say does come true, but it is not what the LORD is saying. So he writes to the exiles the words we have heard:

“Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

The message to not unpack, that exile is temporary was the message of the false prophets. Now, there is a hint of truth in what the false prophets' message – don't get so comfortable in Babylon that you forget your true home. Don't forget your LORD, your Belovedness, your calling. But the reality is, as Jeremiah has prophesied, the people will be in exile 70 years. A generation will live and die in exile. I was struck as I pondered this passage, the exhortation amidst an uncertain future to 'multiply and not dwindle away!' Today, many young people choosing not to have children because of anxieties about the future. *To feel at home in a place, you have to have some prospect of staying there.* Jeremiah's encouragement, even when giving a more sombre prediction of the future is to live! Build, plant, eat, make love, have children, work and pray for peace and prosperity of this place that is not your home.

‘Temporary Residents’

But hold on a minute, doesn't this contradict what Peter says in his letter? That we are pilgrims and foreigners, citizens of another kingdom? Maybe we could read a contradiction. Let's hear the words from Eugene Peterson's Message:

*Friends, this world is not your **home**, so don't make yourselves **cozy** in it. **Don't indulge your ego at the expense of your soul.** Live **an exemplary life in your neighbourhood** so that your actions will refute their prejudices. Then they'll be won over to God's side and be there to join in the celebration when he arrives. 1 Peter 2:11-12*

There's a distinction here between living fully in a place (live an exemplary life in your neighbourhood, invest in the community, in its welfare) with this challenge to not get too cozy. Make home but resist the temptation to get cozy at the expense of your soul. You can be fully at home in a place, rooted in a community, and never be "cozy" in it. You can also be cozy in a place, but never truly live there.

Peter tells us to live as 'temporary residents and foreigners' in this world, as citizens of another Kingdom. But this does not mean that we don't invest in the Kingdom here and now by how we live. In fact, we will be so committed to the good of our neighbourhoods and communities that we will refute their prejudices. Such as those who might claim that we Christians might be "too spiritually minded to be of any earthly good." Rather, we will be so Kingdom minded that we would bless our communities and neighbours that they bring praise to God.

Jesus and an uncertain existence

Finally, we come to the wisdom and the comforting challenge of Jesus. In the midst of anxiety and uncertainty, Jesus tells us not to worry and to trust.

"Look at the birds. Look at the lilies. So don't worry about these things, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today."

This is not a flippant exhortation. Jesus doesn't promise nothing bad will ever happen, only that worry and lack of trust won't prevent it. Verse 27 - which of you by worrying can add an hour to your span of life? That is the point C. S. Lewis was making in his essay when exhorting his readers to spend their time doing "sensible and human things." Worry, dread, fear doesn't buy any security. It only prevents us from living fully.

Is not Jesus' challenge to live in a trustful, childlike relationship with God and invitation to find our sense of home in God, wherever we find ourselves? To make a home, without getting too cozy. To hold it all with an open hand. To not wait till the conditions of what we think 'home' is to be just right

before we truly unpack our bags. To trust God, and believe that whatever our circumstances, we can make a home for ourselves, get to know our neighbours, plant trees you'll never see grow to full size, work for the good of our neighbourhood, knowing that we are just sojourners, foreigners. To commit to a place, to a community, even if it is not perfect. Even if it doesn't (yet) feel like home.

Jayber Crow, at the end of his life, reflects on his life and the act of intentionally choosing a place. He says, *"By all my work, by all my thousand small acts of settling here and renewing my life, I had come to be at home. I had laid my claim on the place and made it answerable to my life. Of course, you can't do that and get away free. You can't choose, it seems, without being chosen. For the place, in return, had laid its claim on me and had made my life answerable to it."*

To be fully alive, even as foreigners and temporary residents, we are called to commit to the place we find ourselves, to make our home in it and live fully in it as much as we can. Yet holding it lightly, not getting too cozy, trusting in the God who may call us on at any time.

So wherever you find yourself, whatever your circumstances, and however long or short your time may be, may you choose the place you're in, and let it choose you. Make your life answerable to the people and the place God has set you in.

I wonder what one thing you could do this week to make home in the place and circumstances of your life in this season?