

Homecoming

communion meditation

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Isaiah 2:2-4

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Last year, I got an invitation to Homecoming Day in Chisholm, Texas. In 1962, my pastoral journey began as a seminary student in this community just east of Dallas. At the time, Chisholm was mostly cotton fields with a few cattle farms, barns, and houses scattered over a fairly large area between Rockwall and Terrell, Texas. We had one general store with a single gas pump in front and one industrial facility, a cotton gin that sat idle most of the year. The gin cranked up in late summer for the fall harvest, and for a couple of months in early fall the highway outside the gin was lined with trailers loaded with the annual income for many of our families. I learned that during harvest, church attendance would be limited to women, children, and the pastor.

I don't know how long the community had been there, but some of the cemetery markers predated the Civil War, and some of my church members worked farms that had been in their family for generations. I was also aware that the cemetery had a larger population than the community.

We had two small churches in town, Baptist and Methodist. The difference between the churches was slight, and most of the folks were members of one or the other because of family tradition rather than choice or doctrinal conviction. On Memorial Day Sunday, the two churches came together for worship and the big event of the year—Homecoming Day. This was the only day that rivaled cotton harvest for community action. Folks came from Big-D and all around Texas to visit the place they called home. We usually filled the church building. Following an abbreviated worship service, the cemetery association made its annual report and appeal for funds to maintain the historic Chisholm Cemetery. Then came the main event, dinner on the ground that dwindled down to goodbyes and washing dishes.

“You can't go home again.” Homecoming at Chisholm focused on the past. It had nothing to do with any promise of change or improvement for the community. It came on Memorial Day week end. This was a time to visit home and remember the good old days gone by. The cemetery was the central attraction. The past took precedence over present and future, and the place of the dead seemed to be of greater concern than care for the living. We were attempting to do what Thomas Wolfe declared to be impossible in his proverbial novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*. It was about nostalgia, homesickness, longing for earlier times and places. This is a side-effect of aging. The longer we live, the more attractive the days of our youth become. The past tends to rise to fill the void of a fading future. Largely because our lives revolve around annual holiday celebrations, the approach of Christmas is marked with a similar appeal to nostalgia. “Home for Christmas” is the theme of numerous songs, movies, and greeting cards. The mythical hope of returning to our youth produces a powerful motivation to sell everything from Christmas trees to airline tickets.

There is nothing wrong with a good memory and a love for history. Our American hero Henry Ford was wrong. History is not bunk. However, the process of moving from childish wishing to adult realism is growing to understand the importance of time in all of its dimensions. At the time the first Isaiah wrote his prophetic message to Judah, the prophetic tendency was to look back with nostalgia on the good old days of the United Kingdom, the wonderful world of David and Solomon, the era of complete independence and total fulfillment in the Land of Promise. But the prophets missed an important point of reality: time is always passing, and the movement is always toward the future. No one ever recovers the past. We do not grow younger; we grow older.

Physicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson was recently interviewed by comedian Jon Stewart. Tyson kept calling attention to the globe turning in the wrong direction at the beginning of the show, and Stewart kept trying to change the subject. Science addresses the problem of nostalgia: Hey, the earth turns, time moves, and it always goes in the same direction, forward toward the future.

In Chisholm I invited a returned missionary to speak in our church. He had served in Lebanon and came home because of the dangerous level of unrest in the country. He told us that the world had changed. The tension between the State of Israel and Lebanon was explosive. He noted that some traditional hymns just did not work there, like “On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand, and cast a wistful eye, to Canaan's fair and happy land where my possessions lie.” That song might fly in Dallas, but not in Beirut. Selling nostalgia at Christmas may be a way to move merchandise, but it hits a wall when

we are dealing with the world as it is rather than as we think it was.

Home is a vision of hope. Isaiah does not open his word to Judah with a call to nostalgia about good old days gone by. The Prophet dares to dream of a home that has never been. Although he locates the place on top of Mount Zion, the eternal city Jerusalem, the significance lies not in the place but in the vision of hope. Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of a day when white children and black children could live together in peace and equality, Isaiah envisioned a time when the nations of the world could come together and work together in peace. They would beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning-hooks. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war anymore."

Most of us are familiar with the sculpture based on Isaiah's vision that stands outside the U.N. Building in New York City. "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares," by Evgeniy Vuchetich, was given by the Soviet Union to the United Nations in 1959. The location is not important. It could have been in Moscow, but the vision is essential. Although the U.N. has never accomplished the vision, the hope for peace on earth is worth the struggle.

Another sculpture interpreting Isaiah's vision is located in Washington, D.C. Mennonite artist Esther Augsburg and her son Michael created a sixteen foot steel image "Guns into Plowshares" in 1995. They melted 3,000 guns collected by the DC police department in an amnesty program to create a giant plowshare. In a city that has long been plagued by gun violence, Isaiah's vision of hope found a new meaning for the new world.

Here we are on the tenth anniversary of church, daring to dream again. We have never called this "Homecoming." All of us have deep memories that precede the existence of this family of faith. This is not an exercise in nostalgia where folks are trying to make the earth turn backwards and time recede toward the past. Like Isaiah, we dream of a time that has never been and a community of hope beyond the reality of anywhere we have ever lived. With Abraham, we long for a community whose architect and builder is God. We cast our vision to the future to the new creation, when our covenant shall be written on our hearts and death is swallowed up in victory.