Advent 2 The Rev. Laurie L. Newman

December 10, 2023 St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

We are in the second week of Advent, that season of waiting and hope. The scripture this morning calls us to prepare, to ready ourselves to receive God. A paradox of Advent, is that while we wait for God, we are with God all along. While we need to be reassured of God's arrival, and our homecoming from exile, we are already at home… The mind can't grasp paradox; it is the knowledge of the soul. So today, let's tap into soul-knowledge.

There is a congregation whose motto I really like: "When you're here, you're home." This December, we are witnessing the very real exile of Gazans from their homes; the fear and insecurity of Israelis in their homes—we may also experience a feeling of exile within our own lives: moving ourselves or family members; the breakup of a relationship; leaving a group or community that has been important to us. . . all these are wilderness experiences that evoke our longing for home.

As a child, I was too familiar with the feeling of exile, and the longing for home. My family moved about every two to four years, from Oklahoma to Kansas to Nebraska to Tennessee to Colorado. My dad was a college professor and pastor. We moved frequently because of his sense of calling. We said goodbye, repeatedly to home and friends. We longed for home, and at the same time, we were home together, a family on the move. Do any of you remember that old TV show "Lost in Space" (with the very cheesy special effects. Remember the robot: "Danger, Will Robinson!") As a little girl, I was a huge fan, probably because I identified with the family in the show. The Robinson family was the first family in space to venture from earth toward the Alpha Centauri solar system. By sabotage, they were knocked off course and lost. Every week, every episode, found them seeking their way home.

Isaiah 40, named it: "Comfort, O comfort my people. . . A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . ." This ancient story of the return home from exile in Babylon still resonates with us. Maybe we can relate now, more than ever:

We are in the wilderness, and feeling a little lost. We are longing for our planet, world, and nation to be healed. Hope seems elusive. We want 2024 to will bring good changes, but now, we are still in the wilderness, preparing the way, the best that we can. That brings us to John the Baptist, in the wilderness, baptizing repentant people. We are waiting for God, and still God is with us.

If you were to title the whole of Mark's Gospel, it might be: "Prepare the Way of the Lord." Biblical scholar Marcus Borg suggested that in Mark's Gospel, "repentance" means a return journey, out of exile, and back home to God.

So, our readings today point to a key theme: A journey out of exile. Following the way of Jesus is following the way back home. What is the way of Jesus? Well, simply put, it's a life of trust in God, truth-telling, mercy-living and forgiveness-giving. It's a life of peace, and rest, home from exile. Life focused on loving those at the margins. Life centered not on the self, but on loving neighbor and enemy. When we prepare the way of the Lord, we follow the way of Jesus with God is at the center. "When we're here, we're home."

Wilderness time is an opportunity for vigorous and honest self- inventory. Now, we seek how to return to God, as a people, and as individuals. We ask, why is the world the way it is? How have we turned away from God? From one another? What needs to be brought to light, to help make home together? The journey from exile is long. Swedish economist and diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld remarked: "How long the road is. But, for all the time the journey has already taken, how you have needed every second of it in order to learn what the road passes-by."

What has the road passed by in your life? What has been in exile in our civic and community life? When we seriously pursue these questions, we prepare the way of the Lord. Then, we turn toward one another. And we turn toward God, acknowledging that we are no longer living a life all focused on ourselves. In the wilderness, we may more easily recognize that God is always offering gifts. Those gifts experienced on the journey are part of how we prepare and make home together.

I am remembering Thanksgiving meal, three years ago. It was during the height of COVID, and before vaccinations, and before my parents had moved to Portland. My young adult sons and I, plus my nephew (the son of my brother), his partner, and their new baby, met out on our back porch for a vegan Thanksgiving. Masked, and bundled in coats and blankets, we remembered the life of my brother, who died just one year before. On the table right along with stuffed mushrooms and roasted veggies was a feast of memories: some joyful and some painful. Lance died suddenly and way too soon. Confusion and anger had tinged even some of the good memories. But as the bright afternoon dimmed toward twilight, I felt a sense of coming home to something new: my grown-up nephew, now a father, sharing what he'd learned from my brother about dedication, attention, and parenting. I began to recall the fun things about Lance: his sense of humor, his quick mind, his thoughtfulness. For my sons, there was the coming home to connections with family, since they hadn't seen their cousin in 15 years. For my nephew, there was sharing about his dad, and our family stories, a special bond we shared. As we broke bread together, we received gifts of vulnerability, love, and joy. I realized that this is not the family I had pictured a decade ago, but was home. We had found Alpha Centauri and home.

In Julie Aageson's wonderful book, *Finding Home,* she writes: "Home is where we find again and again who we are, who are our neighbors are, and what matters most to us. Home is a place for embrace and joy, shelter and meaning. Wholeness and peace. What are we doing, and who are with when we say: when I am here, I am home? What would St. Andrew and the world be like, if we knew in our very bones: when we are together, we are home? When we are with God, we are home? God is already with us, renewing our hearts to be home for the people and love that comes in surprising ways. No more a stranger, or a guest, but like a child at home.