



*Coming Home to Forgiveness*  
December 6, 2020: The Fifth Sunday of Advent  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

***May the words of my mouth, and the mediations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.***

As I hear the first reading from Isaiah this morning, I am transported into the sound world of George Frederic Handel's Messiah. Messiah is one of those pieces of vocal music that helps define for many people the essence of the Advent and Christmas season. *Comfort ye, my people*.

The passage from Isaiah, chapter 40, that Stan read to us this morning contains, by my count, at least five of the movements in Messiah, all taken from the Advent/Christmas portions. I don't what Handel knew about ancient Israelite history, but the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is one of the most powerful in the entire Bible. It touches on one of the most pivotal, formative experiences in Israel's History—the Babylonian Exile about 600 years before the birth of Christ.

Many scholars agree that this passage was addressed to the Israelites in Exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, flattened the protective walls around the city, and carted the aristocracy and prosperous classes back to Babylon (present day Iraq). Second only to the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, the Babylonian Captivity was the defining event in Jewish history up to that time. It called into question the whole notion of a God who loved and cared for Israel.

Into that desperate situation, God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, calls the Israelites to look forward to a comforting, glorious, tender, full-of-forgiveness, homecoming, back to Jerusalem. Here is your God, oh Jerusalem!

In light of this reading, today is *Gaudate* Sunday. *Gaudate* means joy in Latin. *Gaudate* Sunday is a remnant of the traditions of a penitential Advent, when the season was characterized by practices we associate more with Lent, such as fasting, almsgiving, extra prayer, works of mercy, and the like. *Gaudate* Sunday allowed for a temporary respite from the penitential rigors of the season, and a spot of encouragement that a joyful end was near. The pink candle on our Advent wreath symbolizes joy. So today we lift up a homecoming to comfort, and joy, and especially forgiveness.

The ancient Israelites understood their historical fortunes to be either punishment or reward from God in response to how well, how justly and righteously they had lived out their relationship with God and their neighbors.

This may not fit with our understandings and experience of where God is in the midst of tragedy or triumph. But it does show that the Israelites understood their whole life to be the product of their relationship with God. And they understood returning to Jerusalem to be the ultimate homecoming, and a sign of forgiveness.

It is not hard to imagine Advent as a time of longing for home, longing to return home, longing to have a home, like the Israelites.

We are in a kind of exile ourselves. Across our land there are people who are literally homeless because of wildfires, hurricanes, or evictions. Around the world there are nearly 80 million displaced persons, forced to flee their homes. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html> And, of course, there are those who may have every physical comfort that a home can offer, but who long for an emotional homecoming, who yearn to reconnect with friends, family, or the community; or even with themselves. The Israelites, and we, long for home. Sometimes the wait can be a long one.

For Christians, a main way home is forgiveness. Our Gospel lesson this morning reminds us of that. John the Baptist comes on the scene as the opening act for Jesus' appearance. He comes proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, repentance and forgiveness are central to our salvation. This is the good news—that forgiveness is possible.

Jesus placed tremendous importance on forgiveness. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says of his tormentors from the Cross, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands those in the church to forgive those who offend seventy times seven—a metaphor for a habit and lifestyle of forgiveness and mercy.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite writers on theological topics, has this to say about forgiveness: "When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence." (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 29) Forgiveness is a way to be at home in your own skin.

Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is oneself. There is a powerful scene from a film entitled *The Mission* (1986) that illustrates this truth. Set high in the South American jungle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the movie features a Jesuit played by Jeremy Irons who has gained the trust of the indigenous peoples and built a thriving mission; and a slave trader and mercenary, played by Robert DeNiro, who has come seeking redemption for a life of violence. His violence has included killing his brother in a duel, and capturing and selling the very members of the native peoples who are at the center of the mission.

After hearing DeNiro's confession, Irons challenges him to do penance for his sins. DeNiro agrees and decides to accompany the Jesuits on the difficult journey back to their remote jungle mission—all the while dragging behind him the heavy armor and weapons used during his sinful life as a mercenary. The image of DeNiro pulling this bag of death behind him, clambering up steep cliffs pounded by waterfalls and covered with slick vegetation, is agonizing. On their way to the mission, the travelers encounter a band of natives.

In a scene of high drama, one of the natives cuts the thick rope attaching the bag of armor to DeNiro and throws it into the rapids far below in the gorge. And DeNiro, slowly breaks into prolonged sobs, and is comforted by the natives and Jesuits alike.



*Coming Home to Forgiveness*  
December 6, 2020: The Fifth Sunday of Advent  
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment  
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Comfort ye, my people.

Advent is a time to come home after exile, a time to look forward to the healing of forgiveness. God meets us in exile, in the wilderness, of shame and blame. It is a time to welcome Jesus into the homes of our hearts, so that forgiveness of others, and ourselves becomes possible. We can offer refuge to others, and to ourselves, as we travel the path of forgiveness.

**Amen.**