

**“Coming Home”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**The Second Sunday After Christmas**  
**Sunday, January 3, 2010**  
**Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, by the gift of your Holy Spirit, show us the Word made flesh – good news of great joy for all people – so that we may sing with the angels: “Glory in the highest and peace on earth!”; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It is wonderful to see all of you here this Sunday – the very first Sunday of the New Year. I hope you have had and continue to have a wonderful Christmas season. And I am not even going to ask you to raise your hands to tell me if you have already broken one of the resolutions you made two days ago.

Andy Simmons, the Senior Editor for the Readers’ Digest says that he keeps all of his New Year’s resolutions – every one of them. How does he do it? He says it’s really quite simple. After years of introspection, he says, he has developed a healthy understanding of what he can and cannot do. That understanding allows him to keep his resolutions realistic. For example, a few years ago he resolved to gain five pounds. And he did. Last year he decided that he didn’t know enough curse words. Today, he says, his vocabulary is much richer. And for this year? He says, “This will be the year I don’t clean out my garage.”

I know there are many of you here today for whom 2009 was a really difficult year, and I know for some, those hard times continue even now. But whether the year we just ended was good or bad, whether or not we have kept our resolutions – or whether or not we even made any, we still can have the sense of rounding a corner, of turning over a new leaf. We can enter the year 2010 with a sense of hope and optimism in making a new beginning. This happy

awareness is an expression of the hope – and the accompanying peace, love and joy – which we anticipated in Advent and celebrated at Christmas.

Our Christmas scripture lessons and the words of the Christmas carols we sing remind us that God is with us. We heard this comforting message in our Gospel reading for today. Do you remember John’s words? “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known”. But while we might expect to hear good news from the gospel as the meaning of the gospel is “good news”, but the wonderful surprise is to hear this message of good news, as well, in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jeremiah has the reputation of being a prophet of doom and gloom, repeatedly warning the people of the dire consequences of turning away from God. The ancient Hebrews had initially rejoiced that God had led them from slavery in Egypt to a life of peace and security. But the biblical record also shows how badly they had responded to God’s grace and leadership across the ensuing centuries. Having moved into new lands, they had mixed the worship of God with worship of local fertility gods. There had been some short periods of covenant renewal, spurred on by particular priests, prophets, and leaders, but throughout his long ministry Jeremiah had again and again warned the people of the consequences of continuing to ignore God. As one sign of this Jeremiah pointed out that the Babylonian Empire was expanding from the north and that Israel would be no match for this invading power. He warned that the people were again facing exile and devastation.

It is into this context, my friends, that Jeremiah speaks the words we read this morning. In these words, the persistent tone of doom and gloom is replaced with what biblical scholars refer to as the little “Book of Consolation”. The

Word from God which Jeremiah gives us this day is that even though the people had turned away from God, God had not abandoned them. The comfort and consolation is that God would yet again bring them home. This is more than just a physical journey, with whatever difficulties such a trek would involve; Jeremiah is conveying the promise of a different kind of homecoming, a journey of spiritual renewal, of coming back “home” to a right relationship between God and his people.

“Home” is such an evocative word and concept. Is “home” the place where you grew up? Is “home” the house in which you live now? What feelings do you associate with “home”? Are the memories mostly good or bad? Is “home” a happy place in your current experience? Are there people who share your home with you? In what ways do they, or don’t they, make “home” a place of welcome and well-being?

When we say “home” we have a vision in our minds of what makes a dwelling place a home. Jeremiah also had a vision of what home could be. This vision spoke to the Hebrew people as they recalled the time of exile when people had been taken from their homes, transported to a foreign country, and forced into slavery. Far from home they had the unenviable experience of being strangers in a strange land. And now, in another time of uncertainty, Jeremiah relays a promise from God. There will be a return home. God says of these people who had wandered from living in God’s way. “I will lead them back. I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble...Their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again...I will turn their mourning into joy.”

What a vision of home this is, better even than their remembrance of what their home had been like. In the vision of this promise, home had never looked so good! The promise

wasn't just of going back to what had been; the promise was of something so much better.

The promise of a better future can be a great encouragement, but it's still possible to feel stuck where we are. Inertia can make it easier to just stay put. It's possible to get used to things the way they are, and even if difficult or unpleasant, these things are at least familiar and we know what to expect. Moving forward, or "going home" in these kinds of situations means making a change. Scripture tells us that when the ancient Hebrew people finally had the opportunity to return home, some of them refused to begin the journey, preferring to stay with what was familiar.

It may surprise us to see ourselves reacting in the same way in those times when we can't let go of a grudge, when we refuse to forgive or to let ourselves be forgiven, when we can't see beyond our grief or disappointment, when we cling to our harmful addictions or prejudices or hatreds. Whenever we do any of these things we are preventing ourselves from returning to our true home with God, and when this happens we are spurning God's invitation to live in hope and expectation and we are not allowing ourselves to be all that God created us to be.

Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's is a big advocate for adoption. He was an adopted child himself, and he is very grateful for the love and values his adoptive family gave him. Dave tells the story of Kandy, a teen who was adopted. Kandy had only been with her adoptive family for about a year when her birth father invited her to have lunch with him. Her birthfather had been out of Kandy's life for a long time because he was in prison. He wanted to get to know Kandy, and also wanted to some of her questions.

Now, understandably, Kandy's adoptive parents were concerned about this meeting. Their first fear was, since Kandy had only been

with them for a year, that she might decide she wanted to live with her birthfather. Even so, they encouraged her to go because they sensed it was important to her identity and self-esteem.

Kandy and her birthfather had a nice lunch and a good visit. He answered, to the best of his ability, the dozens of questions she had been storing up for so long. When Kandy's adoptive parents arrived at the end of the lunch, Kandy did something unexpected. In the year she had lived with her adoptive parents, Kandy had never touched or hugged her father. But now she reached out and linked arms with her adoptive dad. Grabbing the container with the leftovers from her lunch, she said, "Papa, take me out to the parking lot. I want to put my lunch in the car." It was just a small gesture, but it announced to the world that Kandy was committed to her new family – that she had decided who her father would be.

That's really the question which faces each of us, as we begin this new year, isn't it? Who will be our father? Will God reign in our hearts? Will we come home to God's love, God's peace, God's purpose? Regardless of what Thomas Wolf says, we can go home again. And, my friends, God continues to invite us home to that place where we can celebrate new beginnings, anticipating all that is yet to come as we experience and respond to God's grace and goodness. "Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, even from there, the Lord our God will gather us and bring us back". God is our Father, and with God's help during this coming year, we can be the very best we can be.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to Gordon Timbers for his sermon, "Coming Home to God", and Dave Thomas with Ron Beyma, WELL! (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1994).*

"Coming Home"  
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade  
The Second Sunday after Christmas  
Sunday, January 3, 2010  
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14



The First Presbyterian Church  
of Dunedin  
455 Scotland Street  
Dunedin, Florida 34698  
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297  
WEBSITE: [fpcdunedin.org](http://fpcdunedin.org)  
Email: [officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com)  
Victoria ByRoade, Pastor