

## GOING HOME

ISAIAH 35: 1-10

ADVENT 3

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SHEPHERD OF THE VALLEY LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Even though we may be proud Canadians, most of us have to trace our ancestry off this continent. For some people, that path is a short one. If you are a first generation Canadian, you may remember what the old country was like: the food, the smells, the language, the customs and traditions.

If you are second generation, then maybe you grew up speaking Norwegian, or German or Scottish at home (last year I was amazed to find a modern Scottish movie subtitled into English). Maybe your family kept some of the traditions and customs and foods, and maybe you were embarrassed to be thought of by your friends or classmates as an immigrant and so you tried to suppress any sign of your ethnic origins.

And if you are third generation like I am, then you are probably primarily a Canadian with no ethnic heartstrings or identity pulling at you. But even for people long removed from the immigrant experience, I think there is still a curiosity—an intrigue—about where their ancestors came from.

My father's family, like a number of families in the Regina area, came from a little village called Zichidorf. It was in Austria-Hungary, but is now contained in Serbia. A group of other Zichidorf descendants are planning a trip back to Zichidorf in 2006, and now I get to decide how

intriguing that idea to visit the home of my ancestors really is.

People tend to romanticize the place of their heritage. You may remember the *Spirit of the West* song, "There's none more Scot than a Scot abroad."

A number of years ago my wife and her mother were traveling by tourbus through Scotland. Looking out the window, Agnes asked if they could stop and pick some heather. The driver responded back saying, "Aach, what do you want a handful of weeds for?"

Of course immigrants have choices: they have a new home and an old one. Their lives can move forward and they can commemorate or celebrate the past.

Refugees are another matter. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), over 17 million people have fled their homeland because of war, oppression, or starvation and have no where to go.<sup>1</sup> For the few of them that are able to become sponsored refugees in Canada or other nations, there is some hope. For most, they live their lives in refugee camps with little hope for a job, for schooling, for a home, for a life.

Our lesson from Isaiah is an encouragement to refugees. It was written at a time when the Jewish people had lost their country and were being held captive in Babylon. They longed for a return to Jerusalem. They longed for the day when the strength of Israel would be restored by God.

And the prophet gives them this encouragement. He tells them what it will be like when God restores the people to their homeland. He paints a vision of what a nation will look like when it relies on the Lord God for its

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>

strength, direction and vision. Even the wilderness and deserts shall be glad that God is in charge. The desert flowers like the crocus that normally only bloom for a couple days each year will not stop blooming!

The vision includes a social transformation: no longer will the weak be oppressed. God will see that the weak are made strong; that they will have their vengeance and obtain what they need to live.

The people will be healthy and this health with include not just physical, but also emotional, psychological and spiritual health: the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like a deer, those who had nothing to say will not stop talking about their joy living under God's reign.

And when this day comes that the people can return, the road will be ready and safe.

You know, spiritually we come from another place as well. Some of us are immigrants in this world: we know the stories of God's kingdom. We know the stories of the customs, the beliefs, the language, the worship of God's kingdom but it seems so long ago, so far away, so removed and strange to our everyday existence. We find it intriguing to think about God, to think about how things could be.

Like immigrants everywhere, we think it's nice to touch base with our spiritual roots every so often, but the real job of living goes on in this world—in this place. We'll go back to God for a visit, but we don't want to live there.

And some of us are refugees in this world. This is where we ended up but it isn't home. The world around us doesn't share the values that we want to share. The world around us doesn't have the vision that we know God has for us.

Like refugees everywhere, we exist in this time and place only until we can return home. We earn our living, we buy our food, we clothe our children, but we know that this isn't home. This isn't where we belong. This isn't what we are called to be.

That really is the question for each of us: are we immigrants in this world, or refugees? The answer to that question affects so much of how we live and how we view the reality around us. For spiritual immigrants, Christmas is a cultural tradition; for refugees it is a solemn declaration. For immigrants, it's an experience—a touchstone to where we came from; for refugees it's an identity—it's the central event that defines who we are.

For refugees, we can never really feel comfortable with this “dog-eat-dog” world. We can never feel at home in this world of “might-makes-right” and the “strongest survive” while the weak perish. We can never feel at ease in this world where sin is seen as a virtue and virtue is interpreted as weakness.

For those of us who are spiritual refugees, these words this morning are for our benefit as well. For the day will come when God's reign will extend to all the world. There will be a day when we will come home, and we will find that the weak will be made strong, and the land will bring forth it's abundance, the eyes of the blind will be opened and the lame will leap like a hart. There will be a day when we can walk on God's Holy Highway without fear and no harm can come to us. There will be a day when we shall return home and “everlasting joy shall be upon our heads; and we shall obtain joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (v. 10).