

**“The Crisis of Coming Home”**  
**A sermon by Brent J Eelman**  
**Abington Presbyterian Church**  
**September 9, 2018**

**Genesis 32:22-33:4**

**Luke 4:16-30**

My title, *The Crisis of Coming Home*, takes on a personal dimension in this moment, because the initial crisis for me was writing this sermon. I struggled with this message for a while, not making any headway on it. Finally, I asked Karen what I should preach about. Her response: “Just tell them an old fish story and then make 3 points.”

To which I responded, “That is so retro...no one preaches 3 point sermons anymore!”

I would like to deviate from Karen’s suggested outline and share four “homecoming stories” with you.

I

I told the first story twice while serving as your pastor. It is about the Pacific Salmon that inhabit our great lakes. They begin their life journey in small creeks and feeder streams that soon become the larger rivers that feed into the Great Lakes. When they are able to swim with the current they make their way to the great bodies of water and there they live for 6-9 years, some growing to enormous size. They swim all throughout the lake, often hundreds of miles from their origins, but when they reach the end of their lives, something calls them home to where they began. They find the river, then the stream, then the creek, and return to their place of birth. The entire trip is upstream against the current. They jump over rapids and falls to find their way home. When they arrive, they lay eggs, fertilize them and die. A new cycle of life begins when the eggs hatch and the new salmon begin their journey. The salmon return home.

- It is the story of a struggle.
- It is a story of death.
- It is a story of new life.
- A story of endings and a story of beginnings.

Coming home.... Homecoming... is an integral part of the human story. It is an archetype that gives shape to the narrative of our lives. Returning home involves struggle, (indeed a crisis). It often involves

swimming against the current; using all our strength and moral courage to go upstream when the easy path is to drift with the current. Coming home is often characterized by crisis.

But we are not Salmon. We are beings created in the image of our maker. We are able to think, dream... we are capable of self-transcendence and can think about our thinking. Still, there is something in each of us, a primal drive, which pulls us towards our origins. We, too, experience a gravity that draws us home. We, too, hear the murmurs, "It is time to come home."

## II

The next 3 stories are human stories: homecoming stories. The first is from Luke's gospel. Jesus' first act of ministry was preaching in his hometown of Nazareth. It was a homecoming, but not a happy one. The *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible entitles this section, "The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth." His hometown folk literally wanted to throw him off of a cliff. Why?

Jesus came home and claimed his vocation. After enduring the trials and temptations in the wilderness, Jesus claimed his calling and began his ministry by declaring "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.... I have been anointed to bring good news to the poor and marginalized, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and liberation for oppressed. To bring sight to those who are blind... Today this message of the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled in your hearing." These words would summarize Jesus' ministry for the next 30 months: a ministry of prophetic justice.

Luke didn't explain the reaction to Jesus' message. The home town folk start murmuring with each other, "Is this Joseph's boy?" Then we read that they were filled with rage. Perhaps because he was no longer a boy... "their boy". Perhaps because his ministry would upset the delicate balance of things. We can't be sure...but claiming one's vocation often emerges in crisis and is not always accepted.

A week ago, our nation mourned one of its great leaders, John McCain. One of the things that became clear to many of us was that that his vocation of service to our nation deepened during the crisis of those five years of captivity and torture in Hanoi. Our vocation often emerges during a struggle. He came home to serve.

Vocation isn't about making our families, friends and neighbors happy and proud. It is not about finding the first job. Vocation is about responding to God's claim on our lives and living out our discipleship in

this world. I still follow the lives of the children of APC through Facebook and the stories their parents share in Christmas letters and the like. I am truly moved when I read about how they are claiming their vocations through service. I often wonder about the struggles they have had to arrive at their vocational decisions, and the struggles that lie before them... but I know that within those struggles is a blessing.

I also know that this congregation,

- through its ministry of education and fellowship,
- its ministry of music and worship,
- its ministry of service and mission,

intensified their struggles and shaped the character of a generation that will be a blessing to this community and to the world. Claiming our vocation is “coming home” and it often occurs in the midst of a crisis.

I believe it is also time for the church, which bears the name of Christ, to come home to its prophetic vocation and not shrink from proclaiming the good news of liberty and justice to this world. It is time to come home.

### III

The next story is about the Old Testament Patriarch, Jacob. Jacob returned home as a phenomenal success. He had cattle and sheep, wives and children, indeed all the trophies that one hopes to claim in life. He was returning home with his “posse” to face Esau, the brother who vowed to kill him after being cheated from his birthright. Jacob was returning home as a success. The crisis that he anticipated was Esau, the brother he cheated.

The night before his return, he slept by the river Jabbock. We know the story, he was engaged in a wrestling match by “a man” in the middle of the night. His attacker is not identified in the story. Could it be Esau? Could it be an angel? Could it be God? Could it be his own conscience? Perhaps the reason the Bible doesn’t identify the attacker is because Jacob’s opponent was all of those things.

But most importantly, in that encounter, Jacob was coming home to his true self; to his soul. That night by the river he wrestled with the demons that he had loosed in his life.

- The demons of deception and lying,
- the demons of moral cowardice and narcissism,

- the demons of cynicism and despair.

That night he came home and confronted his true self, naked and unadorned, and it was an epic struggle. In his struggle Jacob was wounded. Our Battles with the self are long, hard and they wound us... but if we are faithful in that conflict, the wound is the portal through which the grace of God enters our lives. It is a crisis that is soul-making.

In order to mature and become a healthy adult, each of us will have our night on banks of the River Jabbock. We, too, will struggle with our interpersonal demons and come home to our true selves, and discover our soul. The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross spoke of this encounter as “the dark night of the soul.” It is a cathartic homecoming that enables us to abide in peace... indeed, shalom.

But the story of Jacob is not merely the story of an individual... it is also the story of a nation and its struggle of self-understanding. Remember, in the midst of this struggle, Jacob received from God the name, “Israel.” This narrative operates on two different levels. It is also the story of the origins of Israel and the meaning of homeland: a nation coming home, maturing and confronting its own national demons.

As we read it, we need to reflect on our own national story. We need to come home to our true sense of nationhood, we need to discover, (or recover) our national soul. We need to confront the demons we have unleashed in our national psyche,

- the demons of racism, and exploitation,
- the demons of plunder and pride,
- the demons of division and prevarication,
- the demons of arrogance and self-deception.

If we can summon the moral courage for this struggle, only then will we be able to embrace (in the words of Abraham Lincoln) the “better angels of our nature.”

It is time to come home.

#### IV

The final story comes from a hymn, written in 1719 by Isaac Watts. Based upon the words of Psalm 90, (Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations), he wrote:

Our God, our Help in ages past,  
 our Hope for years to come,  
 be Thou our Guide while life shall last,  
 and our eternal Home!

"..and our eternal home." This is the most significant homecoming... coming home to our creator, our redeemer and friend. Coming home to God, our eternal home. This is the story that puts into perspective all the other stories. Coming home to God is not characterized by crisis, striving, or struggle. No. It is characterized by grace: the grace of God.

- Coming home to God is the story of the prodigal son who is greeted by the father with open arms.
- Coming home to God is the story of Esau embracing Jacob with his tears.
- Coming home to God is the story of the cross, where even the thief is welcomed into paradise.
- Coming home to God is the story of ultimate comfort, redemption and salvation.
- Coming home to God is captured in the words of John of Patmos:  
*"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

... the home of God is among mortals.

Coming home to God is declared in that old Sunday School hymn:

*Come home, come home;  
 you who are weary come home;  
 earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,  
 calling, O sinner, come home!*

It is time to come home. Amen.