“Let me dwell with you”
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 1:4-11; 7:1-11
Reading from the New Testament: John 14:23

Is it safe for me to assume that over the past couple of weeks the most frequent question you have fielded sounds something like this: Are you going home for Thanksgiving? It is the thesis sentence for November small talk. Replace only the holiday and you have the thesis sentence of December conversations: Are you going home for Christmas?

It is a most innocent question, and yet, at the same time it is heavily weighted with the potential to spur an existential crisis. Home? Where would that be? Homelessness comes in many forms. The aspiring troubadour finds sanctuary from household dysfunction and develops Stratocaster perfection locked in her room, immersing herself in the music that will provide for her escape, taking her act on the road bouncing from roadhouse to concert hall to coliseum to recording studio, writing and singing semi-autobiographical ballads about … longing for home.

I'm sitting in the railway station
Got a ticket to my destination
On a tour of one-night stands my suitcase and guitar in hand
And every stop is neatly planned for a poet and a one-man band
Homeward bound
I wish I was
Homeward bound
Home where my thought's escaping...  *(Homeward Bound, Paul Simon)*

Home. Dwelling place. Is it a place with framing, sheetrock, a
leaky faucet and a temperamental septic tank? Or is it a state of mind
that surprises you in places you’ve never been before, maybe even
halfway around the globe through the hospitality of strangers? Or is it a
mirage that tortures you sometimes, appearing to be so close and so
real, but always evaporating in angry words, broken relationships, or
the seeming plague of unforeseen circumstances?

Occasionally through the years I have heard the angst timbred
voices of those homeless spirits who’ve mastered their vocations, vested
their pensions, and put a nice glossy finish on the family portrait of
their American Dream; and yet, both restless and despairing, they
confessed the habit of staying late at the office, not because they have so
much work to do or that they are up to anything indecent, but solely
because the thought of going home fills them with dread.
I remember one man in full-blown mid-life crisis, and following stereotype, he had moved out of the enviable family McMansion and moved into an apartment. Mid-forties, wife, two children and a Porsche in the garage, and yet homeless, even as he tried to impress the preacher with the way he had decorated the new bachelor pad. *Rolling Stone* magazines tastefully arranged on the desk, fraternity memorabilia on the wall, old sports trophies and soccer cleats on the shelf. What kind of home was he searching for? I managed to refrain from asking him if he was planning to attend the kegger at the Beta house later.

Novelist Dennis Lehane suggested that, “Happiness doesn't lie in conspicuous consumption and the relentless amassing of useless crap. Happiness lies in the person sitting beside you and your ability to talk to them. Happiness is clear-headed human interaction and empathy. Happiness is home ... A place of communion and unconditional love. It is where, when you cross its threshold, you finally feel at peace.”

In the book of the prophet Jeremiah, we find a restive Judah, avaricious, opportunistic, insensitive to the needs of others, and perpetually unsatisfied, always seeking without knowing for what they
are actually seeking, and thus, easily distracted from the covenant life with which they had been blessed by the Lord for their own well-being. They were an advertiser’s dream market. The flier in the mail offering lower rates and higher limits with no mention of swelling debt. The d-list actress offering ripped abs without going to the gym. Lose weight while you sleep. The retired athlete selling the myth that old guys like me can be thirty once again, as though we were ever that hot to begin with. The self-help authors who are only helping themselves by way of your gullibility.

Trend setters, social media influencers, twitter titans. We follow them all. The Judeans offer us a mirror, revealing our vulnerability to the voices promising what we never needed in the first place, and thus distracting us from the fullness of life God intends for us. Remember that the same Jesus who said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” also lamented, “We played the flute for you and you did not dance.”

A promise squandered is the situation of life to which the prophet Jeremiah speaks. Jeremiah conveys the Lord’s lament: “I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you
entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. 8 The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.”

Again, the prophet imparts the timeless lament of the Lord, its tragic truth relevant in every age: “…for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” Given what they truly needed, they instead pursued what they coveted which resulted in broken relationships, injustices against their neighbors, and the fracturing of community and nation. “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” It is the classic and timeless tale of the loving parent lamenting the self-destructive behavior of their child. “Can’t you see what you’re doing? Can’t you see what you’re losing? Can’t you see who you are hurting?”

Based on the memoirs of David and Nic Scheff, the current movie, Beautiful Boy tells the heart fracturing story of survival, relapse, and recovery of a family coping with the opioid addiction of their son over a
number of years. In an initial confrontation between them, the father, played by Steve Carell despairingly cries out, “Why? I thought we were closer than most fathers and sons! This is not us. This is not who we are.” In a quieter moment the father reflects, “There are moments that I look at him, this kid that I raised, who I thought I knew inside and out, and I wonder who he is. I had such grand plans. He was going to graduate from college. He was going to do something amazing. And now, I just want him to not die.”

It is as though the writers, directors, and actors are channeling the basic theme of Jeremiah, a book that is basically an intervention. The Lord sees his children, whom he has loved into life, treasured, and provided for, scuttling the very lives God had given them, rejecting the plans God had for them, drifting from God’s sight, and God’s pain is visceral, “I had such grand plans. He was going to graduate from college. He was going to do something amazing. And now, I just want him to not die.” God sees the people, not only indifferent to what God knows is best for them, but also what God has desired more than anything. Listen to the heart of God in his plea to Israel: “Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.”
Let me dwell with you in this place. The Lord is speaking about making a home with us; this being the whole intention for creation in the first place. Jesus said, “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” Jesus isn’t just speaking about life after death. Jesus is talking about God’s desire for you now. This is the same Jesus who will later say, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Life with you. That is not just God’s desire for you; that is God’s desire for God. “Let me dwell with you.”

Frederick Buechner describes home as “a place where you feel you belong and which in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren’t going all that well at any given moment.”

Buechner recalls a time when as a young author living in New York, he was floundering in his attempt to write his first novel, a novel that just wasn’t coming to life for him. He says his struggle was at least
partly because he was “trying too hard and hadn’t learned yet the importance of letting the empty place inside me open up.” He happened to live next door to a church, and though he wasn’t a church goer, he decided to attend because, get this, somebody had told him the preacher there, George Buttrick, was well worth hearing. Ah, if only...

Anyway, on one December Sunday morning, Buttrick said something in a sermon that stuck with Buechner and had a lasting impact upon him. Buttrick said that on the previous Sunday, as he was leaving the church to go back to the apartment where he lived, he happened to overhear somebody out on the steps asking somebody else, "Are you going home for Christmas?" and Buechner reflects, I can almost see Buttrick with his glasses glittering in the lectern light as he peered out at all those people listening to him in that large, dim sanctuary and asked it again" Are you going home for Christmas?"-and asked it in some sort of way that brought tears to my eyes and made it almost unnecessary for him to move on to his answer to the question, which was that home, finally, is the manger in Bethlehem, the place where at midnight even the oxen kneel.
“Home is where Christ is was what Buttrick said that winter morning, and when the next autumn I found myself to my great surprise putting aside whatever career I thought I might have as a writer and going to Union Seminary instead at least partly because of the tears that kept coming to my eyes, I don't believe that I consciously thought that home was what I was going there in search of, but I believe that was the truth of it.” (Longing for Home, Frederick Buechner)

The Lord entreats us, “Let me dwell with you.” That is what God wants for you. And not just for you, for that is what God wants for God. You don’t have to wait for a holiday to come home. Amen.