

Romans, Home and Empire
by Brian Walsh

Some months ago I got to thinking about Paul's letter to the Romans and the problems of homelessness. Essentially my question was, what happens if I take the work that I've done on the dynamics of home, homelessness and homecoming with Steve Bouma-Prediger in *Beyond Homelessness* and integrate it with the work I'm doing with Sylvia Keesmaat on "disarming Romans."

And the results are kind of interesting. So this week I employed these themes in a sermon for the Wine Before Breakfast community at the University of Toronto. The service opened with Empire Remixer Dave Krause performing Bruce Cockburn's "Santiago Dawn" and the reading of Romans 4.1-25. That is the passage that talks about Abraham's faith and how all of us are children of Abraham. Storytelling and questions of the family tree – this is the stuff of which home is made.

So setting the stage with a summary of Romans 1-3 from the perspective of home I then went on to reflect on what it means to have Abraham as our father. Here's what I came up with.

"I got a dream and I'm not alone
darkness dead and gone
all the people marching home
kissing the rush of dawn"

This has always been the dream,
this has always been the hope.

All the people marching home
kissing the rush of dawn.

Home, covenant, shalom, land, inheritance,
this has always been the heart of the story.

The promise was of a homeland,
the promise to Abraham
the promise to the patriarchs
the promise to the slaves
the promise to exiles.

From the beginning to the end,
it has always been about home.

The longing for home is inexorable,
it cannot be extinguished,
"to keep a million homeless down takes more
than a strong arm up your sleeve."

And there have been many strong arms,
many home destroying arms.

Pharaoh's brick quotas,
slavery in Egypt.

Solomon's forced labour,
home as empire.

The idolatry of the monarchy,
home defiled.

Assyrian and Babylonian exile,
homeless in the empire.

Caesar Augustus,

General Augusto Pinochet.
All murderers of home,
and all in the name of home.

The strong arms of homelessness.
thwarting the promise,
one damn strong arm after another.

“Home ... hard to know what it is
if you've never had one.”

This is Israel's story.
Exile becomes a permanent state of being.

Exiled in their own land,
subject to the military thugs,
enslaved to their own fear,
crucifixion to those who dare to have a voice.

One damn home-destroying empire after another.

Exiled beyond their own land,
a Jewish diaspora
dispersed throughout the empire,
cut off from home,
subject to the imperial whim,
a shameful people,
a foolish people,
a people who resist the imperial constructs of home.

An imperial construction of home.

The empire is a home of freemen and slaves,
and Paul is “a slave of Jesus Christ.”

The Roman home is founded on the myths of the gods,
rooted in the blessings of Zeus,
the victories of Roma.

Paul offers a path home that is rooted in
“the gospel of God ...
promised through his prophets in the holy scriptures.”

Story and home.
Whose story? Which home?

The imperial home is erected on the foundation of Augustus.

Paul proclaims “the gospel concerning his son,
who was descended from David.”

Home and story.
Whose home? Which story?

The home of the empire has the piety
and godliness of Aeneas at its foundation.

Paul's home is for the impious, the ungodly

Home and piety.
Whose piety? Which home?

The imperial home is a structure of hierarchy and shame.
Paul's home welcomes Greeks and barbarians,
the wise and the foolish.
And Paul will not be ashamed of the gospel because
it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,
to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Home and status.
Who is included? Who is honoured?

The apostle is at it again.
Writing an anti-imperial tract
to the very heart of the empire:
undermining the imperial imagination,
disarming the imperial ideology,
upsetting imperial hierarchies,
deconstructing the imperial architecture of home.

Created in the image of God,
we are called to homemaking in God's good creation,
stewards of creation,
caretakers in the creational house of God.

This is our glory,
this is the mantle that we wear,
herein is our wisdom.
But we exchange our glory for idolatry,
we exchange our homemaking service
and serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator.
And we become homewreckers.
And we become homebreakers,
not homemakers.

And so home collapses all around us.
Sexual fidelity devolves into sex as power,
sex as consumption,
a home destroying sexuality.
And things move from bad to worse.
Home rooted in covenant
is undermined by faithlessness.
Home as a place of truth
is destroyed by deceit.
Home as a refuge of respect
is undermined by gossip and rebelliousness.

It's always been about home,
but we are incurable homewreckers.
It's always been about home,
but we engage in domicile.

So who amongst us can judge an other?
Who amongst us can enact home-excluding judgment?
Do any of us have some special virtue,
some higher understanding,
some preferred place in the home that God erects?
No, we are all homebreakers.
Gentile and Jew.

Pagan idolatry meets Jewish torah-breaking
and we are all rendered homeless.
Home requires faithfulness,
yet we are all faithless.
Home requires righteousness,
yet we are all unrighteous.
All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.
All have distorted the image of God.
All have failed in their homemaking stewardship.

All ... save one.
There has been one righteous one,
one faithful one,
one who can atone for the violence of our homebreaking,
by bearing that violence,
by shedding his blood,
by being subject to this domestic violence,
so the violence could stop,
home be healed.

Homecoming is at hand,
not as our accomplishment
but as a gift.

Homecoming is at hand,
not by a steely resolve to obey the torah
(as good as the torah is),
but through grace.

There is no home without grace,
there is no homecoming without gift.

Through Jesus the righteous one,
through Jesus the just one,
through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ,
homecoming is at hand for those who embrace,
and are embraced by,
his faithfulness.

Home is a gift,
home is received in faithfulness.
Isn't that what the story has always been about?
Isn't that the story that is the very foundation of our homemaking?

Remember Abraham.
He was promised a home,
and he received that promise in faith.

So whose father is Abraham?
Who are welcomed into the home that was promised to him?
Who shares in the inheritance of Abraham?
Those who share his faith, of course.
Those who enter this home-constituting story through faith.
Those who claim Abraham as father by embracing the promise of covenantal homecoming.

Remember, the promise was that he would inherit the world!

The whole world, not just the land of Israel,
is to be a home of righteousness.
The whole world was promised,
many people would become Abraham's descendents.

Do you want to come home?
Do you want a home that the empire can never provide?
Then abandon the empire's story of home
and embrace the story of Abraham.
Abandon all exclusionary home constructions,
whether Jewish or Roman,
and find yourself in the inclusive embrace of Abraham.
Abandon all pretense of piety and allow grace
to set things right in your life.

Home is received as a gift through the righteousness of faith.
The only home worth having is built upon the justice of faithfulness.

So, hoping against hope,
follow Abraham and trust the promises,
even against the evidence.

Abraham had a dream,
and he wasn't alone,
darkness dead and gone,
all the people rushing home,
kissing the rush of dawn.

Yes, the forces of homelessness
are forces of death.
Yes, the darkness of the grave
is deep.
But there is a dawn to be embraced.
The dawn of resurrection.
The faithful one,
the one who incarnates justice,
the one who invites us home,
the one who keeps the promise of Abraham,
has died at the hands of the empire,
and has risen in the homemaking power of God.

Faith in this Jesus will make us just.
And in that justice we meet a peace
that the Pax Roman can never understand.
This is a peace with God through Jesus, the Messianic Lord.
This is a peace through the one executed by the empire.
Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.
Jesus is our saviour, not Caesar.

There is no home without grace,
and through this Jesus we can enter the house of grace,
through Jesus we can stand in grace,
and without such standing there can be no home.

First mass rings through smoke and gas
Day flowers out of the night

Creatures of the dark in disarray
Fall before the morning light

This is the first mass, sisters and brothers.
The table is set.
Welcome home.