

Homelessness

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[0 : 00] I am returned from the U.S. with a bit of a bug and a cough. So I've got what seems like one of those weird 100-day cough things that never goes away.

So as is my usual rule, if I have a cough of fitting and I'm unable to continue, whoever runs up and touches the pulpit first can finish the sermon. So for those of you who've always had aspirations of a secret church takeover or something like that, this might be your chance this morning.

We're going to be in the book of Exodus, Exodus chapter 11, chapter 2, sorry, and then verse 11 to 25. Just to give you a sense of where we're going in the coming weeks, next week going forward we're going to start a new series on the doctrine of worship.

And by worship I'm specifically referring to what we do here on a Sunday when we gather for formal or corporate worship. We're going to spend a number of weeks thinking theologically about that. Because I think it's a really important thing.

This in many ways is the centerpiece of Christian activity. And so it's important that we know what we're doing when we worship and why we do what we do when we worship.

[1 : 12] And so we're going to spend a number of weeks in that. And I've enjoyed reading up on that subject over the last few months and I'm looking forward to working on that material. But today I thought I would talk about homelessness a little bit.

And so we'll go to Exodus chapter 2 and read about an episode in Moses' life where he found himself to be somewhat homeless. Exodus 2 and verse 11.

Listen to these words. One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor.

He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hit him in the sand. The next day he went out and he saw two Hebrews fighting.

He asked the one in the wrong, Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew? The man said, Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian? Then Moses was afraid.

[2 : 15] Thought, What I did must have become known. When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.

Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters. And they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their flocks. Some shepherds came along and drove them away.

But Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock. When the girls returned to Reuel, their father, he asked them, Why have you returned so early today?

They answered, An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock. And where is he? Reuel asked his daughters.

Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat. Moses agreed to stay with the man who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage.

[3 : 13] Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, I have become a foreigner in a foreign land. During that long period, the king of Egypt died. And the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out.

And their cry for help, because of their slavery, went up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

And so God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study. Gracious God, your word is our food, our true spiritual sustenance, without which we cannot live, without which we have no hope.

And so we pray that you would feed us this morning. Teach us truth embedded in our hearts, and make us like your son.

All by the power of the Spirit, we pray. Amen. So, one of the things I often feel when I'm on a longer trip away from home, this was two and a half weeks or so that I was away from home on this U.S. trip, a very profitable trip, and I'm happy to tell you about it later on at some point, going to lots of presbytery meetings, meeting lots of churches and partner churches.

[4 : 40] A really profitable time. But one of the things I often feel, as particular as I get into the last third of the trip, is I really start to miss home. I really get homesick.

I almost get teary every single time we fly into Cape Town, and you can see the mountains and stuff like that. I hope to land where the sun is still up, so you can see something of the mountains. The pilot had a bit of a sense of humor on the flight as we landed, because the sun was setting, and we had this really nice view of Table Mountain, so he said to all the people on the right-hand side of the plane, if you look out your window, you can see a fantastic view of Table Mountain and Signal Hill. And for all of those sitting in the middle of the aisle, you can see a fantastic view of the back of the heads of the people looking at Table Mountain and Signal Hill. But I often get almost choked up when I see that.

I'm like, I'm going home. I'm finally going to be home. I get homesick. Now, I wonder what you think of when I say that word, home.

Do you think of a place? Or do you think of a feeling or a sensation of being at home?

[5 : 53] So being at ease, at peace, in a state of comfort, in a state of safety and security? One of the most famous quotes that comes from the poet Maya Angelou is this.

She wrote, The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.

And so I was reading a series of essays on this subject of home, people reflecting on the subject of home and what home truly means. And I found one writer who picked up on this Maya Angelou quote.

And this is what she wrote, reflecting on this. She said, I've been thinking about home and what it is and means to me, and I realized I had no idea what home really is. Is it a house where a family lives together, sharing their lives and all that entails?

Or is it a place you go to where you know that no matter what, you will be loved and accepted with open arms? For me, the concept of home has always been an elusive one.

[6 : 52] I suppose that is because I never really felt as though I had a place I could, without a single doubt, call home. Maya Angelou described it the best when she said, The ache for home lives in all of us.

For a while, I believe with all of my heart, I had found that place called home, and the ache in my soul would long be eased. Unfortunately, the ache returned, and once more I'm left questioning if I will ever find somewhere that will forever be my home.

I want this abode to feel, to be unfailingly mine, a place that no one else can take from me or say I don't belong. I want to feel home, not just have a home, somewhere safe, sheltered, beautiful, where I am loved, accepted, understood, and most of all belong.

See, I think home is primarily a feeling, a sensation, to feel accepted, to feel comforted, to feel secure, to feel loved, and rested, and at peace.

That is what it means to be truly home. It doesn't matter really in that sense where you live. If you have all of those things, then you are at home in the truest sense.

[8 : 22] But as the author of that essay that we just read admits, that feeling seems impossible to attain, to fully attain. And we get glimpses of it, from time to time, little tidbits of it in this life, but we never seem to get all of it, consistently.

And you'll find that theme repeated all the time, in poetry, in songs, in stories. As humans, we just cannot shake the sense, that we are not truly at home, in this world.

Now the Bible, comes along, and it really helps us with this, because it helps us understand, this feeling of homelessness. It gives us a diagnosis, of the human condition. And in this sort of early part, of Moses' life, that we just read, we get a glimpse, into this sort of deep existential problem, that spans the ages, that we all wrestle with.

And so I want to try and draw that out for you, a little bit this morning. So three things I want you to see. Number one, the nature of homelessness. Number two, the challenge of homelessness. And

then number three, the hope of homelessness.

So the nature, the challenge, and the hope of homelessness. Here's the first one, the nature of homelessness. I want you to see in these verses, what a homeless, and alienated individual, Moses becomes, in these early chapters, of the book of Exodus.

[9 : 40] So look down for example, verse 11. One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were, and watched them, at their hard labor.

He saw an Egyptian, beating a Hebrew. One of his own people. So this is the first time, we now encounter Moses as a grown man. He's not a little baby in a basket, which happens earlier in the chapter, where he gets put on the Nile, and he gets raised in Pharaoh's court.

This is now, he's a grown man. He's been raised in Egypt, as an Egyptian. So much so, actually, that you might have noticed, later on, when the Midian women encounter him, they say, oh, we were rescued by an Egyptian.

Verse 19. So he obviously looks, and sounds like an Egyptian. Walks like an Egyptian. I think, as the song goes. But, he hasn't forgotten his roots.

Because the text says, he went out to see his own people. And at that point, we get a clash, between his two identities. Because he sees an Egyptian, beating one of his own people, and then this happens in verse 12.

[10 : 50] Looking this way and that, and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian, and he hit him in the sand. So, it's almost like he sees his Hebrew, his Israelite identity, as primary.

He sides with the Hebrews, over the Egyptians here. But then, verse 13. The next day, he went out, he saw two Hebrews fighting, and he asked the one in the wrong, why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?

And the man said, who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me, as you killed the Egyptian? And then Moses was afraid, and he thought, what I did must have become known.

When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh, and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well. So, he's not really accepted, by his own people, by the Hebrews.

And now, he can't go back to his Egyptian home, because Pharaoh wants to kill him, because of his actions. And so, he runs away. He runs very, very far away.

[11 : 55] He runs to Midian. We're not actually entirely sure, the location of Midian, or this particular group of Midianites. They were quite a nomadic people, so they moved. We know that it was, quite far east from Egypt, probably the kind of, top northeast section, of the Sinai Peninsula, and into the bottom part, of ancient Canaan.

Moses runs really far away, is the point. Far away from Egypt. But here, in this far off place, through a series of events, he now actually starts to build a home.

So verse 16. A priest of Midian, had seven daughters, and they came to draw water, and fill the troughs, to water their father's flock. Some shepherds came along, and drove them away, but Moses got up, and came to their rescue, and watered their flock.

When the girls returned, to Ruel, their father, he asked them, why have you returned, so early today? They answered, an Egyptian rescued us, from the shepherds. He even drew water for us, and watered the flock.

And where is he? Ruel asked his daughters. Why do you leave him? Invite him, to have something to eat. Moses agreed, to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah, to Moses in marriage.

[13 : 12] So, Moses gets married, and he starts to settle down, in his new home, build a life. But then, verse 22, Zipporah gave birth, to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, I've become a foreigner, in a foreign land.

So, even though he's building, a new family, and a new place, and a new home, he's still, acutely aware, that he doesn't actually fit in. He doesn't truly, belong. Maybe if you didn't, grow up in Cape Town, you might understand, something, of, this experience.

So, you can be like me. I was born here, in Cape Town, but I spent, my schooling, and university years, in the city of Durban. So, sort of my formative years, in Durban.

In this stint, I've lived now, continuously in Cape Town, since 2005. So, that's 20 years, plus there were a couple, of other times, in Cape Town, before that. But formative years, in Durban.

But you look overall, and you say, well if you count up the numbers, I've spent more of my life, in Cape Town, than anywhere else, and almost all of my adult life, in Cape Town. I'm pretty, Cape Townian, now. But here's the thing, I, can be incredibly, Cape Townian, and still not completely, fit in.

[14:34] So, I can trail, run on the mountains, I can do the August cycle tour, every single year, I can eat Gatsby's, from Golden Dish, I can be pretentious, and unfriendly, I can even, and this goes against, everything in me, as a Durbanite, I can even wear a speedo, on Clifton 4th.

But the minute, that I open my mouth, and I say the word, fish, you go, oh, he's from Durban. Moses wasn't Egyptian enough, he wasn't Hebrew enough, and when he builds a new home, and a new family, in Midian, he's still not, Midianite, enough.

The text just, continually, and quite emphatically, portrays his homelessness. And this is the story of Israel, up to this point, the story of humanity, really.

You go right back, to the very beginning, to Adam and Eve, in the garden, at home, in the garden, they were at home, there was shalom, there was harmony, there was peace there. The Christian thinker, Francis Schaeffer, points us out in his book, on Genesis, he says, there was harmony, and peace in four ways, in the garden.

Between God, and humanity, there's peace there. Between humanity, Adam and Eve, there's peace there. Between humanity, and nature, there's peace there. And then even, in turn, Adam is fulfilled, he has life, and blessing, in the garden.

[16:06] They were, by every definition, at home, completely at home, in the truest sense, of the word. But sin, enters in, and makes him homeless.

Because it brings alienation. There's alienation, between God, and humanity. That relationship, is broken. Adam hides, from God. There's alienation, between man, and woman.

They pick up leaves, and they cover themselves, they protect themselves, now from each other.

There's alienation, between humanity, and creation. Adam is now, going to work, the ground, by the sweat, of his brow.

And there's alienation, on the inside. There's frustration, now at life. There's the experience, of pain now, and dealing with that. And then after all of that, they're expelled, from the garden.

Expelled, from their home. There's a flashing, sword at the entrance, saying you cannot, come back in. That's a big picture, view of the state, of humanity, that we get very early on, in the Bible.

[17:08] That humanity is homeless, and here's why. Humanity is homeless, because of our sin.

Now then you fast forward, in the storyline, in the Bible, and you fast forward, to the patriarchs, you fast forward, to Abraham.

Look at how he is portrayed, in scripture. God calls him, out of his home, and makes him a wanderer, wanderer. He's always moving, he's always nomadic.

Same with Isaac, same with Jacob, and all of this sort of, wandering and moving, culminates with the Israelites, far removed, from their promised home, in slavery, in Egypt.

And so this is this, very distinct theme, of homelessness, that runs all the way, through the text. And it's that same theme, that's being picked up, and even reenacted, a little bit here, in the early chapters of Exodus, in Moses' life.

Moses looks in three different places, for his home, but he just doesn't find it, anywhere. Now friends, as people, I think we need to come to terms, with this. That is, I think you need to come to terms, with your own homelessness.

[18:14] You have to see, that sin has so deeply, damaged our world, and ourselves, that now we experience, daily, what Maya Angelou calls, that ache.

You ache for something, that you don't have. And that ache is, is so very evident, in so many different ways. It's evident, in our failing bodies. It is evident, in the entropy, all around us, that we continually, keep throwing money, and energy at, trying to sort of stave off.

It's evident, in the relationships, that we gain, but then lose. It's evident, in how fleeting, moments of unbridled joy, seem to be.

It's evident, in how hard contentment, is to come by. True peace, true rest. It's evident, in our daily fears, around security, around safety, around the future.

But, more than just, acknowledging, your experience, of the world, which I think, is obvious, you have to go further, you have to make, the connection, between that feeling, of homelessness.

[19 : 34] We can all see, the symptoms of, we can all describe, the symptoms of. You have to make, the connection, between that feeling, of homelessness, and your alienation, from God. You have to connect, the dots, like the Bible does, between the experience, of the world, and the fact, that sin, has fractured, the fabric, of everything, around us, and in us.

Because, if you don't, make that connection, if you don't join, those dots, you'll be tempted, to think, that that feeling, of homelessness, can be rectified, by rearranging, the circumstances, of your life. That there's, something you, will be able to do, to make the ache, go away. And we, think that, doing all sorts, of things like, doing more exercise, acquiring more wealth, curating, the right friendships, and relationships, well if I do, all those things, well, and effectively, and consistently, that's going to, take the ache away.

You can begin, to really think, that you can make, this world, as it currently is, your ultimate home, your true home. And I want to say to you, and the Bible says to you, repeatedly, through the stories, of the patriarchs, through the stories, of Moses, through the overall, storyline of the Bible, the Bible repeatedly, says to you, friends, that is a lie.

It is a lie, it is a big, fat lie. It is an incredibly, seductive, and powerful lie, but it is a terribly, terribly cruel, lie. See, so long as alienation, from God, remains the root problem, this world, will never be, your home, and any attempt, to make it, your home, is going to, actually create, even deeper aches, in your soul.

[21 : 24] Let me go, a little step further here. For those of us, who inhabit, this sort of more, affluent, middle class world, which most of us, in this congregation do, I think a failure, to come to terms, with our homelessness, is one of the biggest things, that is keeping us, from being more, sort of radical, passionate, and effective Christians, in our faith.

For many of us, the reasons, why our faith is weak, our obedience is weak, the reason why, it feels like, we don't have enough motivation, to do the things of God, is that, we believe the lie, we started to believe, that we, can, build, a true home, here, in the present.

Our primary attention, goes into, building that home, in this life, and because of our affluence, our relative affluence, we're able, to temporarily, plaster over, the cracks, of homelessness.

we're able to, give the veneer, that actually, you know what, I'm, I can get a, a decent measure of peace, and comfort, and rest. You know, how incredibly dangerous, that is.

So very, very dangerous. It's like somebody, building a six, six bedroom, beach house, on the, tropical island shore, while all the while, there's a 60 foot, tsunami, over the horizon, that is coming towards, that beach.

[23 : 03] And even though, the tsunami warnings, have been sounded, they've sent out the pamphlets, they've put it on the radio, when you, relax, on that comfortable, chair, on that, expansive deck, that you've built, watching a glorious, sunset, over this exquisite, beach, for a moment, you start to forget, about the tsunami, that's coming.

So our affluence, what it does, is it dulls us, to the reality, that we can't actually, build a true home, in this present world. What we need to see, is we need to see, that our homelessness, stems, from our alienation, from God.

You cannot use, your middle class affluence, to fix it. You just can't. There's no job, that any company, in this city, can offer you, that will fix it.

There is no house, that you can purchase, in Clifton, or in Constantia, or in Higovale, that will satisfy, your desire, to be at home, in God.

Now I know, many of us believe, this is an intellectual level. But does that belief, reflect in the way, that you live? Does it reflect, in your aspirations?

[24 : 19] Does it reflect, in your priorities? Does it reflect, in where you invest, your time, in where you invest, your energy, in where you invest, your resources? You cannot, build your true home, in the world, as it presently is.

And friends, as Christians, of all people, we should know this. We who claim, to follow Jesus. Who is Jesus? Matthew, Matthew chapter 8, a very smart, religious leader, comes up to Jesus, and says, teacher, I will follow you, wherever you will go.

And Jesus replies, foxes have dens, and birds have nests, but the son of man, has no place, to lay his head. We of all people, we who claim, to follow the homeless Messiah, should know, what a fool's errand, it is to try, and build, our true and lasting home, in this world, as it presently is.

Because we understand, the nature of our homelessness. And so that's the first thing, we've got to do. We've got to understand, the nature of our homelessness, and its connection, to our alienation from God.

Here's the second thing, the challenge of homelessness. Because you might say, well if I don't build my true home, here, now, then what do I do, now?

[25 : 34] What should I spend my time doing, in this state of homelessness? And that's what I would call, the challenge of homelessness. I wonder if you were, as we were reading through that story, if you noticed, Moses' concern, for the weak, in the text.

You notice in verse 11, his concern for the Hebrew, being beaten by the Egyptian. You notice in verse 13, when he confronts the two Hebrews, fighting each other, he actually goes after, the one that the text describes, as being in the wrong.

So there was an aggressor, in that situation, he goes and confronts him. You notice in verse 17, when he gets, to the well, in Midian, he fights off, bullying shepherds, who are harassing the woman, and who evidently harass them, every day, because their father says, why are you home so early?

Moses repeatedly shows concern, for the weaker party, in this story. In fact, the very well known, Old Testament scholar, by the name of Desmond Alexander, points out that this text, seems to be deliberately, highlighting Moses, as a defender of the weak.

There's a sharp irony, actually there, in verse 14, where the one Hebrew man, says to Moses, who made you ruler, and judge over us? Because that's exactly, who God is going to set, Moses up to be.

[26 : 53] And I think we see, the early signs of, why God chooses Moses, to lead, and oppress people, out of slavery. It's because Moses, well he constantly, has an eye for the weak.

He's constantly concerned, about the oppressed. It's almost as if, in a realization, of his own homelessness, he now starts, to become, acutely attentive, to the harsher realities, of homelessness, as it's played out, in the lives of other people, around him.

And this is the challenge, of homelessness, that I think we need to meet. If we're all, to varying degrees, experiencing this, cosmic homelessness, then friends, we are all hurting.

Everybody, everybody sitting here, this morning, is hurting in some way. We're all hurting, we are all struggling, we are all suffering. And our challenge, I think, is to meet each other, in that hurt, in that struggle, in that suffering.

We've got to, in a sense, be fighting back, against the effects, of homelessness, in the lives, of others around us. We've got to, expend our time, and our energy, and our resources, on ministering, in very concrete ways, to people, in their homelessness.

[28 : 11] Now there are, really a thousand different ways, I could apply this, but let me stick, with the line, that I started in the first point. By God's providence, we're a largely affluent church, relatively speaking.

We have a lot of people, in this church, who are in high income, professions. Or to put it, a little bit more bluntly, there are a lot of people, who are, either making a lot of money, or who are, primed, to be able, to make a lot of money, in the future, based on what they're studying, and what their, profession they're starting out, in right now.

My challenge, would be to you, if you're in that bracket, and if you're sitting there, wondering if you are, in that bracket, it probably means, you are in that bracket. My challenge to you, would be this.

Are you using, that money, in a futile attempt, to build your own home, in this world, or are you generously, and sacrificially, using that money, to fight back, against homelessness, in others?

For example, you have heard me, bang on this drum, numerous times. This is part of the reason, why I've been in the US, twice in the last, three months, but we desperately, desperately need, to plant more churches, in the city, in all sorts, of different neighborhoods.

[29 : 36] If alienation, from God, is the source, of cosmic, homelessness, then, can there be, a more urgent, task, than widespread, aggressive church planting, of churches, that teach, and preach, the gospel, of the crucified Messiah, who reconciles us, back to God.

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