

## COMING HOME

Mark 1: 1-8

Coming home... What images or thoughts come to your mind with those words?... Christmas is often envisioned as a time where people are coming home. It's a time to be together with loved ones and those we don't always see or connect with often. And why don't we? Because in our modern world people are busy and they move around. Some have called this a dislocation not only from place but a dislocation also from ourselves. To find ourselves is also about coming home. It's as if there's a rootedness in us we must find again and again in order to be whole. So much of the brokenness in our world may very well be a dislocation from home and what home can mean for each and every one of us.

One of the most wonderful books I've read in recent times about the meaning of home is a novel called: *Medicine Walk*, by Richard Wagamese. The main character is an indigenous teenager: Franklin Starlight. Franklin's mother died when he was very young and he has little to no memory of her. His father, Eldon, is an alcoholic living in some small town boarding house with little to no contact with Franklin. But one thing Eldon has done is leave Franklin in the care of one who is called "the old man". The old man teaches Franklin how to live on the land, survive from the land and be one with the land. We're talking here about the rugged and beautiful backcountry of British Columbia.

But the story really begins when Franklin's father gets in touch with him and asks him for a big favour. He's dying from liver disease and he wants Franklin to take him to the one place that has ever felt like home: a ridge with a wide expanse looking out at the forest and mountains. This is the one place in all his years Eldon has ever felt seen and known. But in order to do this, Franklin must work through his anger at his father and the abandonment he has felt all these years. The story is all about Franklin reluctantly but eventually agreeing to take his father on this journey through the land to this ridge where his father – Eldon, can die looking out. This would be a coming home for him.

Throughout the journey, Franklin also learns about how his father became dislocated from the land and his identity as an indigenous man. From a poverty-stricken childhood, to fighting in the Korean War, and later to the derelict houses of mill towns, Eldon, like so many indigenous people is forced to leave his land and survive in the white man's world, suffering racism, abuse, neglect and a decimation of his humanity.

But the hope and promise in this story is that Franklin the son has re-established this connection with the land and knows how to live with it, in it and on it respecting it and receiving it's bounty. The question is: can he forgive his father and overcome the last hurdle of his coming home? This happens when they finally arrive at the mountain ridge. Eldon refers to

the “great mystery”. “We’re a great mystery”, he tells Franklin, and “the things they done, those old time Indians, was all about learnin’ to live with the mystery... just being with it. I guess I wish I’d learned the secret to doing that.” Despite confessing this failure, however, Eldon also tells Franklin all about his mother whom Franklin had never known. He also asks Franklin for forgiveness... Franklin is opened up to forgiving his father, recognizing what he had lived and the circumstances that pushed him far away from home. Eldon dies at peace and at home looking out of that great mystery... And Franklin, he also comes home by forgiving his father and making peace within himself.

And you know, this story really helped me rethink the story of John the Baptist in our gospels. In recent biblical scholarship, clearly influenced from indigenous readings, I’ve heard John the Baptist referred to as an indigenous man. Let’s think about this. While his people, the Jewish people, are living colonial domination under Rome with their own leaders aiding and abetting such domination for personal gain, you have John the Baptist living off grid, in the wilderness. And just like the people long ago escaped slavery in Egypt and made their journey through the wilderness in order to get to a promised land they could call home; and just like they had to learn in the wilderness how to live off the land, eating a bread like substance produced on the land they called “manna” and creatures of the land called quails, John is also living off the land eating locusts and wild honey. Does this not communicate a core message to us already? Is John not reproducing the imagery of the journey from slavery to freedom and inviting his people to undertake a new journey now, a new journey home?

Our reading also introduces John through the ancient prophecy from Isaiah. It points to John as the fulfillment of prophecy. This only further underscores his role as preparing the way for the people to come home. Isaiah is prophesying about preparing the way in the wilderness with reference to that first journey out of Egypt and slavery. But Isaiah’s prophecy also points to a second journey the people had to make - out of Babylon and exile. This is the people’s history and it’s a story of the people having to find their way home again.

And now, John is preparing the people once again for homecoming. He tells them he is preparing the way for a new Moses who will lead them to a new promised land out of slavery to freedom through a transformation beginning with their hearts: “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” John declares. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is a spiritual kindling akin to the physical act of being submerged in water and rising up again. Passing through the waters of baptism is like shedding off the old and embracing the new.

But, in order to prepare for their baptism journey home, the people need to do something. They need to “repent for the forgiveness of their sins.” Baptism is a symbol of their leaving behind their old life as slaves and exiles, and entering into a new life as free people fully coming home to themselves and their creator. As they left Egypt and their enslavement behind and crossed the sea into new life as a people, being baptized in the river Jordan is a renewed

cleansing and the start of a new chapter in their lives, a new journey home. The external act of Baptism points to something we cannot see that happens within the heart of every person. It involves repentance and forgiveness, something expressed and experienced deep in the heart.

OK, preacher, tell us then, what does it mean to repent and what does it mean to forgive, and who needs what? Do I need to repent? What about him or her or them? Do I need forgiveness? What about what he or she or they have done to me and to us? And is forgiveness just a free pass for those who dominate and mistreat us so they keep on doing what they do? How is any of this a pathway to freedom and to coming home?

If you read all the gospel accounts of John you cannot miss his finger pointing at specific groups for specific sins they are committing in need of forgiveness. There are the soldiers and gentile colonists oppressing the people. There are the religious authorities who are self-righteous, yet also greedy. They benefit from the system of oppression as it is. There are the everyday people who are full of hate and fear and a do-whatever-you-have-to-do-to-survive mentality who abuse and take advantage of their neighbour. Everyone is included in some way. Everyone needs to repent and come clean. Everyone needs change beginning deep within their hearts. Unless the liberation begins from deep down in the spirit, it will never be a genuine liberation no matter how much change happens on the outside.

But there's something more too. The people who come out to John in search of a greater freedom, in search of a way home, are people who have come to realize their need. They do not have the privilege of just sitting back in their comfort and enjoying the status quo. They are ready for change. They are hungry for change. They want to figure out what change means for them and whether they're ready to make the journey it will take to get home...

OK, so what are the obstacles to change and to getting home then? Well, to repent for something is hard when I am full of grievance for the wrongs others have done to me... But repentance is not ignoring the wrongs of others. No. Rather to repent means I take responsibility for my life... Repentance is not about putting myself down and burdening myself with guilt and condemnation. It's about taking responsibility for my life and not depending on someone else to do something for me. I am the one who has to rise up and claim my personhood fully for myself.

It is empowering for me to recognize that at the end of the day it's between me and God and how I treat the person next to me, be they friend or enemy. Ultimately it's about my dignity and integrity before God and in myself. Whether I am victim or a perpetrator of harm, I must take responsibility and repent of what I have done or how I have been defined by what's been done to me... Freedom and coming home can only happen when I can be given the inner strength, the gift of the Holy Spirit, to take responsibility and reclaim my life. And that has to

include repentance for my own forgiveness as I have allowed my sins or the sins of others to define me and determine my behaviour too...

This also means I need forgiveness as much as I need to forgive... I need forgiveness for wallowing in my victimhood... Of course I need a lot of compassion and understanding offered to me too... I can't tell someone else to rise up without caring for them and having compassion for them. It's also no good telling someone else to rise up from their victimhood if I haven't known a similar victimhood myself or worse, if I am the cause of their victimhood. But I can also show the way to others by repenting myself and seeking out forgiveness myself for the ways I have not risen up when the divine hand of empowering love has been given to me...

And no doubt, these are hard lessons to learn... They are hard words to speak and to hear... John the Baptist's credibility is that he lives what he preaches. He takes nothing from the system and gains nothing from it... He is challenging everyone within it however they are afflicted by it or benefit from it. He summons them to repent, to come clean, to rise up and take responsibility for their lives, how they wrong others and themselves. John challenges them to repent for how they misvalue their lives so that they can find their true value in compassion for others and for themselves, to find the gift of heart to forgive others and to forgive themselves. It is by forgiving that one is also empowered to make the journey home and liberate others on the way too...

John's message is a message for us all... As Canadians and as new Canadians, we inherit a history where wrongs have been committed to first peoples of this land... Wrongs continue to be committed as we are part of global and local systems that create inequality of opportunity and privilege... We wrong mother earth every day... And yet this land and this nation have so many possibilities that make it the dream of so many too...

And we are also individual persons, within individual families, relations, communities, friendships and circumstances... We have our own stories... And we have our own struggles, hopes, disappointments and dreams when it comes to going home and the obstacles to getting home... How may the call to repentance for the forgiveness of our sins be the call we need at this time of our lives, in this season of Advent, in anticipation of the gift of the Christ child and his love birthed in us this Christmas?...

Let us pray: Come to us, O Christ, and walk with us as we make our journey home this Advent and this Christmas... Baptize us with your Holy Spirit as we cleanse our hearts through repentance in search of forgiveness... Empower us to claim and reclaim our lives through your love...Amen.