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A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, January 4, 2009

In the past week since Christmas Day, we have fast-forwarded twelve years later. Joseph and Mary are settled in their hometown of Nazareth where they have raised Jesus as normally as possible for a son whose birth circumstances were so curious. Since the visit in Bethlehem by the shepherds and then by the wise men from the East, the family then fled to Egypt for a few years, Joseph having been warned in a dream that King Herod wanted Jesus dead. When they finally are able to go back to Nazareth, I am sure that both parents hope to finally settle down and raise their son in peace and with a stable family life. It's hard being a refugee family. It's hard being unsettled, being in-between times, home but not quite at home. It's time for normal life to resume.

This Sunday in the liturgical year is a kind of microcosm of the in-between times. To the world, especially the retail world (which seems to dominate), Christmas is over. But it's still Christmas, the second Sunday of Christmas. Half of us have already taken down our Christmas decorations (the other half will take them down tomorrow or wait until June!). But then we will join with the whole gathered community later today to celebrate the birth of the newborn Christ Child.

The world outside us is unsettled, in-between times also. The economy is changing by the day, even by the hour. Some of us don't know whether we will have a job or a house next year, or next month. Our families are changing—children are growing up or going away to college; we gain new family members through marriage or birth; we lose loved ones to death or divorce. The world situation has always been unsettled, financially, politically, culturally. We are about to inaugurate a new administration, one very different from the current administration. New scientific discoveries show even a universe that is restless. And perhaps most of all, our hearts are restless, longing for something deeper and more settled and more grounded than what is possible in this changing world. We always seem to be in-between times. As exciting as this world and these times might be, do we not sometimes long for a place or a time that we can rest in and be truly at home? By habit or by need, we follow our normal path of daily life and routine, hoping that it would make us grounded.

So when Joseph and Mary make their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem with 12-year-old Jesus, it is clear that the boy and his parents are on two different paths. To the parents, they are going "as usual for the festival," and they assume that all is normal. They are following their normal path of daily life. They haven't tracked the changes that have happened in Jesus over the years. So when he is missing from their traveling party, they look for him in all the usual places—they look for him among their relatives and friends. Then they look for him in Jerusalem at the inn where they stayed during the festival. It takes them three days for them to realize that he might be in the temple. Luke says that when they find him, they're "astonished." But from what Mary says to Jesus,

“highly annoyed” might be a better description: “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been so worried!” Now, this is the last time that we hear about Jesus until he is 30 years old, when he is baptized and begins his ministry. It doesn’t take more than a parent’s ordinary perspective to know why: After this incident with Jesus disappearing for 3 days without telling his parents, I think that Jesus was grounded for the next 18 years!

But while the Holy Parents are making their usual pilgrimage to Jerusalem in their traditional way, Jesus is clearly on another pilgrimage—a pilgrimage that would satisfy the restlessness in his heart. And so, he ends up in the temple of the Lord.

I’m sure that Jesus finds affirmation of his longing in the Scriptures that he is learning to read and that he is asking the temple elders about. The prophet Jeremiah writes about the remnant of Israel returning from exile, returning to their rightful homeland. And where is this? Is it the Holy Land and the holy city Jerusalem? Going deeper, Jesus can turn to Psalm 84, which says: “How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord.” In the temple, he finds the dwelling place that the writer of Psalm 84 sings about—where one day serving as doorman is better than a thousand days in any earthly house. When he is found in the temple, Jesus tells his parents, “Did you not know that I would be in my Father’s house?” Later, he will go even deeper into his heart and know that his Father’s house is not the temple, or any place on this earth, and he will say to his disciples, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you.” The temple is only a shadow of God’s real home, which is in God, which is God himself. Having lived his early years in exile and as a refugee, Jesus knows what it means to long for a true home. And he will point the way for us, who also long for a true home.

Because we all live in exile, in a way—a spiritual exile. Or to put it another way, like Jesus and like the psalmist, we are on our own pilgrimage. We live in a world that promises every creature comfort, but does not satisfy our deepest desire, which is to be home. And we are never truly home until we abide in God, who is our true spiritual home. This earth is only a rest stop, an in-between place that nourishes us until we reach the place that God intends for us, which is God himself. Our true home is the place where we have yet to arrive. As children of God, we are not ever going to be truly home until God calls us, restores us, and brings us there—with Jesus’ help. On this day, the second Sunday of Christmas, we look to the One who himself began his life as a homeless person, and who became the person in whom every heart can find a home. Let us keep alive our own desire and longing for the courts of the Lord, our true home, in this in-between time and place, and give thanks to him who brings us there, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.