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Title: Where's Your Home?

Date: August 23, 2009

Scripture: I Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

For more than thirty years John Smeltzer has spent his Saturdays walking up and down Yonge Street in Richmond Hill, Ontario visiting every establishment that is open for business. The store owners, clerks and even some customers have come to expect him, and Saturdays somehow aren't the same if John hasn't stopped by for his quick visit.

When the staff at Country Style Donuts sees him coming they make sure that his favourite coffee and donut is waiting for him as he walks through the door. One day as he was enjoying his coffee and donut with a friend, a group of bikers walked through the door. These were not members of your friendly neighbourhood bike club that trade in their Harley's for stethoscopes and briefcases on Monday morning. No, these were bikers with the nail headed leathers, tattoos, attitudes and biceps designed to intimidate and set them apart. John walked right up to the leader of the group, stuck out his right hand and said, "My name is John. What's your name?" The man was taken aback and didn't know how to respond. But John remained smilingly persistent and said again "My name is John. What's your name?" So the man answered, "My name is" because he really didn't know what else to do.

Having Down syndrome doesn't give one many advantages in this world. But a gift it does give is an almost complete fearlessness of people that allows them to approach intimidating strangers and ask personal questions like the one John asked next. "Where's your home?" The biker man stammered back "where do I live?" John answered, "No, where's your home?" The man stared at John before finally answering quietly, "My home is in Cornwall." With a big smile John said "Oh yeah, that's right," patted the tattooed shoulder of the person he now considered to be his new friend, and went back to his coffee and donut with his old friend.

"Where's your home?" John asks this question to every person he meets every Saturday. He doesn't ask "Where do you live?" He asks "Where is your home?" which is a very different, and a much deeper question. Most people on the Yonge Street strip give John the same answer every week and tell John where they live. But for the few that are paying attention to their lives, John's question "where is your home?" repeated week after week after week leads to a deeper reflection and awareness of how, where, and to whom, they belong in the world.

Like the biker, our first reaction is to give our street address when someone asks us where our home is. This is true to a point. Our street address often gives the physical location where we participate in important relationships that help us to find meaning and purpose in our lives. And it is our relationships, not where our mail is delivered, that finally determines where our home is.

But not just any relationship defines where we belong. It is our covenanted relationships that reveal where our home really is. What is a covenant relationship? It is a relationship in which each person makes a binding commitment to shape and be shaped by the other, to love and to be loved by the other, to know and to be known by the other, to trust and to be trusted by the other, to be faithful and to keep the promises one has made to the other. Covenant relationships exist between wives and husbands, parents and children, committed friends, with the earth, and most

importantly with God. When these covenant relationships are healthy and intact, we know where we belong and where our home is. When these covenant relationships are broken the question “where is your home” becomes painfully difficult to answer.

If, instead of a tattooed biker, God had walked into Country Style Donuts that Saturday morning, John would still have gone over and asked “My name is John. What’s your name?” God would have answered “I Am who I Am, Yahweh, The One Who Saves, the Holy One of Israel, and other stuff like that.” John would have smiled and nodded and asked the next question, “Where’s your home?” And the Creator of the Universe would have said...?

The answer to this question was probably clearest at the creation of the world. God had at least two places that he would have called home. As the creator who existed before the heavens and the earth had a physical presence, God is at home in some incomprehensible reality that is independent of the created order. And God was also at home on the earth and in his relationship with Adam and Eve. He walked in the garden in the cool of the day and had regular visits with Adam and Eve.

God had a covenant relationship with Adam and Eve. The details of the covenant agreement weren’t very complicated. God basically said “Everything that I have created will give you life except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Please do not eat the fruit of that tree. If you don’t eat its fruit you will have the fullness of life. If you decide to eat the fruit, however, you will die.”

We know what happened next. They decided to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fullness of life they experienced ended together with their intimate and immediate experience of the presence of God. The earth became a more difficult and less homey place to live. Security guards in the form of cherubim were placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to keep out the riff raff. It’s probably safe to say that as this was all happening, Adam and Eve might have found it difficult to know what to say if John had asked them “where is your home?”

And maybe God wouldn’t have known how to answer John’s question either. It’s true that he created the universe and that everything belongs to him. But a place isn’t your home just because you have visitation rights. God was no longer welcome on the earth in the same way that he had been. People were scared of him and hid from him. And there’s something about security guards that take away from the sense of home even if you’re the one who’s hired them.

Where’s your home, Adam and Eve? Where’s your home, Yahweh? These are not separate questions. Adam and Eve and God were at home in their unbroken and intimate covenant relationship with each other. When that relationship was broken by disobedience and sin, everybody became homeless.

The Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures are essentially a record of the long journey back home to that unbroken and intimate covenant relationship. By the time we get to the scripture read today, the Ark of the Covenant was the visible sign of the covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant was God’s “home.”

The ark was a small box 4' long, 2.5' wide, and 2.5' deep. It was made of an extremely hard and thorny wood that was completely covered in gold. The cover of the box was made of gold and had two golden cherubim (the same kind of angel that guards the entrance to the Garden of Eden) on either side.

Inside the Ark were the two stone tablets on which God had written the 10 commandments. These commandments summarized the requirements for an unbroken covenant relationship between people, and between people and God. They had been unnecessary in the Garden of Eden because healthy relationships came naturally in a world without sin. But after sin entered the human experience, even the most basic principles of healthy relationships needed to be spelled out in black and white.

There was also a sense in which the Ark of the Covenant had been homeless. After the Ark led the Israelites through the wilderness and across the river Jordan, it stayed for a while at Gilgal before moving to Shiloh in the time of the prophets. During the time of Samuel, the Ark was stolen by the Philistines for seven months. But because it caused nothing but trouble for them the Philistines returned it to Kiriath-jearim where it remained for 20 years. King David then installed the ark in a tent at Jerusalem. And finally, as we read in today's scripture, King Solomon installed the ark in the temple that he had just finished building on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

Solomon was bringing the ark home. Solomon was bringing Yahweh home. If John Smeltzer were to ask King Solomon, "Where is God's home?" Solomon could point up the hill to the temple and say, "It's right over there." The Ark of the Covenant, the visible sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel finally rested at the heart of the temple which was at the heart of the nation of Israel. God must have approved for the cloud of the presence of God filled the temple with such power that the priests were unable to continue their duties so long as the cloud was there.

It must have been quite the day: Solomon had fulfilled his father's dream of a magnificent temple to Yahweh, and Yahweh had blessed the effort with an impressive demonstration of divine power and presence. In the midst of all this, however, Solomon realizes that the temple and all its contents cannot even begin to contain the power and glory of God. Yet the temple is the best he has to offer and so he pleads with God to acknowledge the temple and to listen to the prayers that are offered there. It is clear that Solomon realizes that his efforts to "bring God home" are incomplete at best.

Solomon also realizes that even though the Ark of the Covenant was now located at the most important edifice of the Jewish nation, God will listen and respond to anyone who calls upon his name in prayer regardless of whether or not they belong to the people of Israel.

In Solomon's realization that God's glory cannot be contained by the temple, and that God's compassion and grace cannot be limited to members of the nation of Israel, we can hear the longing for a more complete experience of the presence of God, a longing which we can confidently say was fulfilled in the atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Ark of the Covenant isn't mentioned very much in the biblical record after this passage. The kings that came after Solomon did not, for the most part, love Yahweh and the people of Israel consistently failed to maintain their end of the covenant with him. The Ark was either lost or destroyed during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. When the temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, the Ark was not replaced. The Ark of the Covenant was not present in this second temple, or in the temple built by Herod during Jesus' time.

It is quite remarkable that the Ark of the Covenant was not replaced, and that its spot in the Holy of Holies remained empty for the half-millennium preceding the birth of Jesus. For Jesus is the new Ark of the Covenant. In Jesus, God is fully present, fully at home. Through the atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are invited to share in a restored covenant relationship with God and to once again be truly at home with each other and with God. When we invite Jesus into our lives, our hearts become the temple which the cloud of the presence of God is pleased to fill. The most important reality of our journey of faith is not obedience to laws chiseled onto ancient stone tablets in a gold covered box, but faithfulness to our relationship with God through Jesus Christ who perfectly obeyed and fulfilled every stone chiseled word in that first Ark of the Covenant, and who calls, empowers, and enables us to do the same.

Where's your home? Let it be true that our home is in the heart of God, and that God's home is in the hearts of each one of us here this morning.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift