

Ezra 1:1-4

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people - may their God be with them! - are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel - he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

Luke 15:11-31

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe - the best one - and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate

with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Sermon

There is an old story that was printed in the Reader's Digest in 1961 by Kenyon J. Scudder, a version of which I want to share with you this morning.

"A friend of mine happened to be sitting in a railroad coach heading to St. Louis. He was on his way to do business in the city for a few days. As the train was making its way down the tracks, my friend noticed a young man who was obviously depressed and anxious. My friend said, 'Good morning, is everything ok?' Finally, the young man revealed some of his history. He told my friend about how he was a rebellious teen and always seemed to get in trouble at home. He told him how he left his home as soon as possible, but that he continued to get in trouble wherever he went and that eventually that trouble got him thrown in prison. He had just spent the last three years in jail and was a very recent paroled convict. The young man shared the shame that he had brought to his family, and that they had neither visited nor written often. He hoped, however, that this was only because they were too poor to travel and too uneducated to write. He hoped, despite the evidence, that they had forgiven him.

"He told my friend about the letter he had written three weeks ago, a letter that the warden sent to his family for him. To make it easy for them, the young man had written them asking that they put up a signal for him when the train passed their little farm on the outskirts of town. If the family had forgiven him, if they were willing to let him come home, they were to put up a white ribbon in the big apple tree which stood near the tracks. If they didn't want him to return, they were to do nothing, and he would remain on the train as it traveled onward.

"As the train neared his hometown, the suspense became so great that he couldn't bear to look out of his window. He exclaimed, 'In just five minutes the engineer will sound the whistle indicating our approach to the long bend which opens into the valley I know as home. Will you watch for the apple tree at the side of the track?' My friend said he would; they exchanged places. The minutes seemed like hours, but then there came the shrill sound of the train whistle.

"The young man asked, 'Can you see the tree? Is there a white ribbon?'

"Came the reply, 'I see the tree, but I do not see one ribbon but many. There is a white ribbon on every branch. Son, someone surely does love you.'

"As the train pulled into the station and slowed to a stop, the young man stepped off the train - onto the platform - and stopped short. He couldn't believe his eyes. There stood his dad, his brothers and sisters, his mom, and many of his aunts and uncles. It looked

like the whole town was there to welcome him home. Tears began to stream from his eyes, and soon everyone was crying and hugging him. The 'prodigal son' had come home."

This week is the week that we celebrate Thanksgiving and we do so with a feast and with counting our blessings and giving thanks for the harvest of this year. But I believe, at the heart of this season, is a sense of home, a sense of place, a sense of belonging. Many of us will travel "home" and see family and friends that sometimes we only see once or twice a year. Many of us will welcome others into our home and feel the warmth of family and love and forgiveness. Some may not have the same warmth, but you also will be thinking about home and place. But this week we also prepare for the season that follows; for Advent and Christmas, and this week we prepare for a homecoming of our own, here at the Church in the Wildwood.

Next week we will celebrate our 165th year of ministry and we have invited and will welcome many members and folks from our history to return home for one Sunday. We will greet one another and catch up, we will sing together songs of the season and worship together, we will eat and we will hang greens and I hope that White Lick Presbyterian will feel like home for all that have been invited and all that will come.

I hope that you will do your part in this, by coming and bringing family, by inviting friends of the church and friends who might be looking for a church home. I know you will be gracious hosts, offering warm welcomes and bountiful hospitality. But we get to next Sunday, I want you to help show our community and the world that White Lick is ready to welcome everyone home, that every son and every daughter is welcomed with open arms. And so I have ribbons for each of us to use and I invite you, at the end of our service today, to brave the cold for a few minutes, to take your ribbon, and step outside the doors in the back, and find a place along the rails or where ever it makes sense, and tie your ribbon on as a sign of our desire and hope that we can be a place, a people, that welcomes everyone home. Thanks be to God for calling us home and allowing us to welcome others to feel the warmth of God's love and grace. Thanks be to God. Amen