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On Home, Homelessness, and Existential Transit

Héctor A. Acero Ferrer*

Text: Numbers 14: 13-25

Ever since arriving in Canada (more than 15 years ago), I have felt a deep discomfort with theological texts or theological discussions that deal with the themes of *land*, *place*, or *home*. Every time I attend a religious service or hear an academic reflection that centers on these notions, my levels of anxiety raise uncontrollably. I feel as if I'm placed behind a distorting veil, needing to strain my eyes and suppress my feelings to see what others do. The notion of home that is readily available to those around me is foreign, almost damaging to me, and the comfort and consolation it brings to others makes it impossible for me to ever share my perspective.

For some strange reason, the connection between the idea of God and the idea of home—a positive, generative, and caring connection, which often emanates from the scriptural narratives that speak about land—is at the core of my discomfort. But why? How can this promising and hopeful account of God as home be harmful to anyone? How can anyone resist this hopeful understanding of history as a process of home restoration, brought about by the cooperation of divine and human motives? Why aren't I capable of receiving the goodness that is intended by this open and welcoming interpretation of the Biblical narratives? What is so wrong in illustrating God's care, compassion, and steadfast love with the image of home? I beg your forgiveness as I hijack this moment of reflection to work through some these questions aloud. Call it community attestation.

For a very strange reason, some of the best-known theological attempts to read the notion of "home" onto Biblical narratives kept me up last night. In the dimmed light of this morning's sunrise, it occurred to me that the reason for my interpretive insomnia was my own upbringing—in a setting that wasn't "home" in a traditional sense and in a country in which homelessness numbers are overwhelming; or simply the fact that last night I went to bed after reading a Twit by a friend who is increasingly worried about the alarming number of people facing homelessness in Toronto (10,000 according to latest research).

But our experience of homelessness is not isolated to extreme cases and, most definitely, is not restricted to the material expressions of homelessness we encounter in our urban centers. Regardless of our cultural background, economic means, and social status, we are bound to spend most of our lives in a state of forced psychological, intellectual, and spiritual *transit*... a sort of homelessness. I borrow the expression 'in transit' from the American immigration department, which uses it to describe the most precarious visa a foreigner can be offered in the United States. In the hierarchy of American Citizenship and Immigration you can be a citizen, hold a Green Card, hold a purpose visa (which allows you to work or study for a limited period of time), hold a tourist visa, or simply be *in transit*. I always thought that this bureaucratic term had a resounding philosophico-theological ring to it. The expression *in transit* almost outperforms Heidegger's *being-towards-death* in

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signalling a type of existence whose most significant characteristic is that it will come to an end. I can almost hear Heidegger's applause at the American border patrol: "Welcome to our country! We, however, welcome you only in virtue of the fact that you are departing shortly. Once again, welcome!"

If we truly live existences that are marked by us being *in transit*—as thousands of years of philosophy and theology would have us conclude—why do we find the images of home, homemaking, home-coming, etc. so appealing in illustrating what God does *for* and *with* us? What is, then, God's place within the historical experience marked by our being *in transit*? This brings me to the root of my discomfort with the notion of home as used in many theological circles: they compel us to understand God as a destination, an end point, an unattained future even when speaking about a God who cares about what happens in history. If most of our lives are spent *in transit*, how is the expression 'home' adequate to describe any substantive aspect of who God is *for* us in the here and now? And what about the millions of people who do live in material homelessness? I don't know about you, but for me... a Roman Catholic Colombian religiously raised in the context of Liberation Theology, this image is just not good enough. My theological categories cannot make sense of a God who is patiently waiting for us to arrive at the end of a life journey through which we are consistently alone. More to the point, I resist to believe in a God who is building for us a beautiful place of hospitality in *another* realm of existence while we suffer through our *in-transit* existence. This understanding of God makes no sense to me!

I grew up in the late 80s and early 90s in Colombia, a time of devastating violence, political upheaval, and social decline for the country. While I was unjustly privileged to avoid most of the horrors suffered by my compatriots, it was impossible for me not to be aware—even at an early age—of how war was eroding people's sense of ethical orientation, their natural goodness. The many images of violence that assaulted my generation daily, however, did not destroy the goodwill of those with true faith. It is that journey resilience, and God's participation in that journey, that I like to offer for your consideration this morning.

One of the memories that kept coming back to me as I was preparing today's words was a very early memory of my mother taking me on pilgrimage. During the worst part of the Colombian crisis, my mom, the ever-resilient Sara Ferrer, would undertake a journey every Sunday morning to one of the most frequented local shrines, *La Basílica del Niño Jesús del Veinte de Julio* (The Basilica of the Divine Child in the Veinte de Julio neighborhood in Bogotá). I remember getting up around 3:00am so that we could make it to the basilica for 5:00am Mass—as the rest of the day the crowds were so large that we didn't stand a chance to get near the church at a later service. Picture it: a huge church, a monastery, a large courtyard, a very large square, and all adjacent streets filled to their maximum capacity with pilgrims coming from all over the country, with the relentless hope that their journey would eventually pay off in the form of peace, health, a decent paying job, etc. And I can tell you for certain that those were people's requests because individual prayers were being said aloud, in all these spaces, at the same time that Mass was going on in the background.

It was in the cacophony of those prayers—some of supplication, some of lament, some of thanksgiving, some of praise—that I was first exposed to the image of a pilgrim. As a small and scared 5-year-old who was easily overwhelmed by the size of the crowds, I knew without the shadow of a doubt that a pilgrim was someone so absolutely certain of their being on a journey *with* God that they spoke to God aloud, without fear, in public, about their deepest sorrows, griefs, hopes, and joys. Their journey was *with* God, not *towards* God! More than

thirty years and a lot of theological training later, I realized that the unshakeable hope of the pilgrims who surrounded me back then, as well as the hope that animated my own mother in her actions, said something of particular importance about who God is and what God does *for* and *with* us. In the silence of their hearts, pilgrims are always certain that their God is in very close proximity to them, journeying with them through it all, and that it would only take a little public nudge on a Sunday morning for their God to act *for* them in a definite and liberating way, freeing them from their current pain and sorrow.

Perhaps this pilgrim God is the one who constantly whispers to our ears that we are accompanied and cared for whether we are homeless, stateless, or landless. Perhaps this pilgrim God is visible in ways we have lost the ability to see, and we just need to be re-attuned to see the incredible pillar of cloud travelling with us in erratic-yet-certain ways. Perhaps this pilgrim God only needs us to join the cacophony of supplications of the pilgrim people of Colombia—and of many other places in turmoil—to reassure us that being in transit is just as saintly as being homed. Perhaps this pilgrim God is also *in transit* with us, also journeying, also homeless; sharing in our pains and sorrows; rejoicing alongside us in our moments of joy; and getting lost along the way when we fail to effectively navigate the complex journey that is life.