

Making a Home
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I have been thinking about the word “homemaker.” It is a word that is mostly used in the United States, and it has no absolutely strict definition, but has connotations of housework, child-rearing, cooking and household management. We might also use the word housewife or househusband...and then we veer off into controversy, it seems to me. Cultural standards and expectations rear them heads. It turns out that homemaking is a charged subject: people can do it well or not so well; people can choose to ignore the whole issue...and then open themselves up for disapproval or outright condemnation. How **does** one make a home these days?

Complicating this question is the new reality of mobility. I have read that 20% to 30% of all Americans move each year and the average American moves fourteen times over a lifetime. We are a transient culture. We move through homes almost as quickly as the caddis fly, whose picture we saw during the children’s message.

And then there’s the emotional angle: the deep need in the human being for security and nurture, often recognized more in its absence than its presence. So we tear up when we hear stories about forced evacuation from homes, or the natural disasters that drive people away from everything they known and owned, or of homecoming after estrangement. Each human culture understands these things, and creates strong expectations about welcome and hospitality and care for the homeless.

This train of thought was, of course, inspired by the Bible readings for today. We hear Jesus speaking to his disciples, who had left hearth and home to follow him, with no certainty at all about where they will land. He says, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them and make our home with them.” The older versions say “make our abode with them,” or “abide with them.” One of the newer translations says “We’ll move right into the neighborhood!” (That’s the version that John Henry used to bring to Bible Study, and we called it the “Surfer Bible.”)

But, regardless of the exact translation, here is the unusual thought: wherever we are, when we are prepared and aware and connected, will become God’s home. Wherever we are, in our home of origin or on the road, we have access to the Holy Spirit, which teaches us and helps us remember. Wherever we are in the world, in places of trouble and danger, we have the gift of peace. In the scene today, Jesus speaks cryptically: “I am going away and I am coming to you.” In some mystical equation, absence will equal presence. But make no mistake. It is God who will come and make a home with mortals.

The words of Revelation describe a visionary poet’s experience of being “in the Spirit.” His mystical dream awakens him to a divine reality, described as an actual landscape. Last week we heard “See, the home of God is among mortals,” and this week we hear about a city, the New Jerusalem, arriving from heaven. This vision is offered as a trajectory: allowing us to see the

horizon towards which God leads us and all of creation. The world is bathed in healing light, which is actually the presence of God, dwelling with us.

Now, there are few books of the Bible more confusing than the Book of Revelation. The images given to us in Scripture always need translation, but we are overloaded with information in these dream passages. What does it mean that light emanates from God, and that there will be no night at all? What about a tree that bears twelve different kinds of fruit? What about the throne and the Lamb (capital L)? What about the name of God written on everyone's forehead? And we did not even read the verses about the twelve gates made of huge pearls, or the streets of gold, or the twelve different kinds of jewels that adorn the walls of this city. This is an artist's playground, but how do we take hold of it to live by? How do we translate words and images into a reality that works for today?

Even though they speak in poetical ways, the readings for today are about the grounded-ness of our relationship with God; of the dwelling-with-ness of divine life. The Gospel of John often returns to this theme, from "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" to "God so loved the world" to "We will come and make a home with them," to "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Revelation continues this train of thought. The great vision of God's restoration of creation is not about going up into the air, and escaping to heaven. It is about God and heaven coming close, and closer, and transforming this world and this place. This is God's nature: to enter into the beloved place and the beloved people and make it home. This is the example given by Jesus. He entered a community and loved it. This world, this place, with all humanity and all living things has been called into being by love, and restored through healing by love: the kind of love that comes close and makes a home.

Jesus tries to communicate this to his disciples and to us. Just as was true 2,000 years ago, it is hard to hear his message through the static of fear and insecurity. Just as was true of those disciples, the first impulse is to retreat into our own small spheres of safety – to hide, in other words. Eventually they came to realize that Jesus was offering a different kind of security, a different kind of peace, a different kind of home. They would still be in places of danger, they would still be wanderers. But because God had made a home with them, they were at home in the world. Because they sensed that God abided with them, they could abide with each other. Because they had a vision of a city of peace, irrigated by the river of the water of life, healed by the tree of life, with gates open to all nations, they could serve neighbors and strangers and enemies as future co-citizens.

The passages today invite us to play with the concept of guest and host. When God comes here to live, whose home is it? Are we the welcome guest, or the long-lost child, finally finding warmth and love at this hearth? Or are we the busy homemaker, trying to set everything up so that God will find a welcome with us? Perhaps it is the way we welcome other people to abide in our lives, knowing that the shared space between us is the most congenial spot of all for divine grace to enter in.

And, lest we think we can stay comfortably in spiritual metaphors all day, we remember that hospitality and homemaking are hands-on skills. Knowing that we will never be unwelcome guests in the house of God, we look around and see who has been condemned, rejected, or shunned. There are practical, physical ways to extend care and concern to these folks: a meal, a quilt, a ride, a visit.

None of those words or actions appear in the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, but I suspect that each such gesture brings heaven a little closer to earth.

John Bell, the Scottish songwriter who visited this church last winter, wrote a hymn about heaven that I like. The last verse goes:

Heaven shall not wait for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another shore
Jesus is Lord; in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now and then for evermore.

“In our present imperfection,” we join God in being homemakers: a shared labor of love.
Amen.