

"Home"  
September 12, 2021  
Psalm 90

"O God our help in ages past  
Our hope for years to come  
Our shelter from the stormy blast...  
And our eternal home."

When I lived in Florida one of everyone's favorite things to talk about (besides the weather) was where are you from?

It was almost a given that everyone was from somewhere else except for a very small handful of people who were actually from Florida.

I remember a wonderful woman named Mary Bell, asking her where her home was. She had just turned 100 years old, and when I asked her where her home was, she said right away in a beautiful Scottish accent, "Oh my home is Edinburgh Scotland. I am staying here in Florida, but I belong to Edinburgh. She had been living in Florida for over 28 years when she told me that.

Home is that special place where we belong. Home is a powerful concept in all of our collective memories. Memories might be happy, sweet, and joyous, or painful and difficult, but most always they are important.

Whenever I return to visit my hometown of MtL I often drive by the house where I grew up. It is full of memories. I see projects like the retaining wall my dad had installed. The small Italian shrubs in the back yard were getting about 30 feet tall. There are memories of big dinners, family events, so much more.

I wonder if you are thinking of some similar memories right now? What is it about that place which really makes it home?

So here we are having been, most of us, in our homes for 18 months, and now for some of us, and everyone on Zoom, returning to our church home, our Saint Mark sanctuary.

What are we to make of this extraordinary time? What is it about this place that we had longed to return to?

Not surprisingly, the Bible has some things to say about this powerful concept of home, and not surprisingly, it is an important spiritual concept as well.

Let me just share three things.

1 The Biblical witness is that over and over, we learn that places are sacred.

Think about all the examples. The transcendent God becomes present in a place. IN Genesis 12, God called Abram, and God said go to a place that I will show to you. God took him to the land of Canaan.

So much of the Old Testament refers to places as sacred because it is promised to them by God in the scriptures.

The book of Acts talks about Simon Peter preaching in Rome among other places, and that he was martyred for this in Rome. I have had the experience of going to that place, stood in St Peters Square, then inside the massive basilica where the tomb is and it feels sacred to me. Remember we Presbyterians share a common history with the Catholic church for about the first 1500 years of the Christian faith

Places are sacred.

So many people have been excited for good reason to return to this place physically, as they are able, and we know not everyone is able to do that yet. To many this place is sacred. One way we know that is how many sit in the same place each Sunday. Those chairs are special. I even sit in the same chair, no one wants that one.

Some of us have very funny stories about being out of town, and dropping into a church on Sunday morning and accidentally sitting in "someone else's pew by accident. Usually you are politely informed that you will be more comfortable sitting somewhere else!

By the way, if you ever find yourself at the New York Ave PC next to the White House, many of you know they have preserved Abe Lincoln's pew in the their sanctuary. It is a special feeling to sit there.

If you go back far enough in church history, you used to be able to buy a pew - kind of like the NFL's seat license idea I guess.

But we feel a certain place is special to us. That is ok! Places are significant. This sanctuary is significant. Not in and of itself, but because its structure ideally helps us focus on God. It is where we hear God's word, where hymns are played, where we take time to meditate and focus on things which transcend our everyday life and struggle.

Some have had life changing insights here, or major life milestones. Weddings, baptisms, even memorial services.

It really is a sanctuary.

I have also been thinking about all the various meanings of that word, sanctuary.

For instance, we know that yesterday was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and do you know the first response of churches in NYC was? Before the important work of disaster relief and so much more, churches like one large PC(USA) church in mid-town Manhattan simply opened their doors to the sanctuary. With chaos going on all around, they simply allowed people to come in to the pews, literally as a sanctuary, get their wits about them, remember there is a God. Some churches just began reading from the Psalms, or just sat with those who were traumatized. A sacred place can do that.

Places are sacred.

2 People make places a home.

We have been reminded so well this past year and a half, that it is the community that really makes the place special, and it's no surprise that the Biblical witness teaches that. In my most referred to book of the New Testament, we see that Paul holds a special place for the church in Philippi, not because of the beauty of their building I am certain, but the people he holds in his heart.

He calls them his joy and crown. Most think it was the first such church he really started, and it was at the crossroads of important travel routes of the ancient world.

It is people that make the place. As he said, "It is right that I keep you in my heart every day because you hold me in your heart.

Home is where people hold us in their hearts.

It is good to be reminded of that.

Many people in our church have made a great effort to remember that even as we have been physically distant

during this time. The Ministry team meetings have continued, we have been sharing the good news gazette stories, even congregational town hall meetings, we have formed a talented Pastor Nominating Committee, and managed to have small get togethers in coffee hour and now more and more in person, it has been the reminder that it really is the people that make the difference, not just the building.

Home is where people hold us in their hearts.

3 Our ultimate home, our eternal home is found in God alone. I hope we have all experienced that once more.

One of the hardest things for us is when people in our family or church family die, the Biblical witness tells us about a room in our Father's house or in some translations, our Father's mansion with a room prepared for them. That image of home again.

Jesus said "I have gone to prepare a place for you. And when I come, I will take you to myself so that where I am there you may be also."

That promise of a home is both comforting and hard to grasp at the same time.

Yet we also read the beauty and the promise of Psalm 90,

"Lord you have been our dwelling place - our home - in all generations, before the mountains were brought forth or ever you have formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting."

With that promise and that truth, also comes the wisdom in that Psalm to find that home today, not just wait for eternity.

The Psalm asks God to teach us to number our days, to treasure each day, to rejoice and be glad all our days, and also to prosper the work of our hands.

And to know: God is ultimately our home, whether we are in a beautiful building, or alone in a room, or out of town somewhere. Or at work. In quarantine, in lockdown, wherever.

Jesus and the promises of the Psalms and other scripture are what we can count on. He will hold our hearts in his hands. As we find that home, we can discover that all places are sacred - sanctuaries, nature, kitchen tables, Zoom rooms. And that it's people that make places special, and our true home is in God.

That's what Isaac Watts meant when he wrote the words in the year 1719 to the hymn we will sing in a minute:

Our God Our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.

May it be so.