

HOME, AT LAST

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11; 16; LUKE 1:26-38

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

DECEMBER 21, 2014/4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

I want to begin by reading a letter from home.

[Read letter from Damaris in Germany]

Maybe you have received (or written) letters from faraway places or to faraway places. Letters *from* home, letters *to* home. This is part of what the season entails.

Many of us have also been waiting for people we love—kids, grandkids, cousins, friends—to *come home* this week.

Or, perhaps, we have been waiting to go somewhere else if somewhere else is home.

Or, maybe we are longing for a home that we can't get to this year.

There is this idea of “home for Christmas” that finds its way into our songs and our conversations and our imaginations each year around this time. It expresses so much of what we associate with this season, so much of what makes this a special time of the year.

On this last Sunday of Advent 2014, I am thinking of the word “home.”

What do you associate with this word?

The place you were born?

The place where you spent the formative years of your life?

The place where you have hung your hat for the most consecutive years?

The place where you received a welcome?

The place where you first found stable employment and settled down?

The place you find yourself going *back* to often?

The place where many of the people you love happen to be?

Maybe all of the above?

Whatever you associate with home, I think it has *something* to do with two P's. Permanence and presence.

Permanence: Somewhere stable and solid. Somewhere you don't have to leave.

Presence: Of the people that have played a formative role in your life.

So, we have this association with "home" and "Christmas." Wherever our various paths might take us throughout the year, Christmas is the time—if we are fortunate—where we come home. To a place and to people.

What about God? Does God have a home?

Where does God belong? Where does God find the best fit?

Where is God expected to show up? Where does God receive a welcome?

Our two texts this morning could be read as an exploration of this simple question:

Where is God's home?

The texts are separated by around a thousand years and deal with different casts of characters, but both have to do with this important question.

In 2 Samuel 7 we encounter David, the shepherd boy who has finally become king.

Let's set the scene a bit:

- There has been a long complicated relationship with Saul, Israel's first king.
- David has assumed power after Saul's death, and has defeated the Philistines
- He has taken control of the city of Jerusalem
- He has brought the Ark of the Covenant (which contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments) back to the city (the Philistines had taken it after winning a previous battle)
- He has built up and fortified the city of Jerusalem and built a lavish palace for himself

He is settled. Israel has a temporary peace. It says in verse one of chapter seven that "the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him."

And David surveys this situation and thinks, “How can I live in a palace like this while the ark of God remains in a tent?” He begins to make plans to rectify this unacceptable situation, to build a house worthy of the Lord who has made him king and given him victory.

But wait a minute. God has other ideas. Through the prophet Nathan, he says...

I have never dwelt in a house of cedar... When I have ever asked for a house?

And before David can answer *that* question, God changes the subject.

He talks not about the house that his people will build for *him*, but about the house that *he* will build—the house of David. He will make David’s name great. He promises that he will establish the throne of David forever.

In a sense God says, *Don’t worry about building a home for me. I am the builder in this relationship, and what I am building is far bigger and greater and more permanent than any structure you could ever build for me.*

Now we know that eventually a temple *would* be built, of course. We know that David’s son Solomon would eventually build a lavish home for the Lord, but here, before a stone is laid, the it already feels like a kind of concession, something God grudgingly allows, but has no need of.

This is similar to the institution of kingship in general.

Recall that the original plan was that God would be king over his people, but the people were desperate for a king like the other nations. God allowed it and graciously worked through it. But it was not plan A.

When God finally agreed to give the people a king, he said to the prophet Samuel, “*It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king*” (1 Sam. 8:7).

In the same way, God has no need or desire for an opulent home built by human hands. What God desires—what God has *always* desired—is a *people* who reflect his creational intentions.

The prophet Isaiah, many years later, would remind the people of Israel of this basic truth about where God is at home:

This is what the Lord says:

“Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me? (Isaiah 66:1)

Later on, the Apostle Paul would echo this theme to the people of Athens on the Areopagas:

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. **25** And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:24-25).

Fast forward a millennia or so to the events described in Luke 1.

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, “You will have a son and you will call him Jesus, *Yeshua*, YHWH saves!”

Mary, an unwed teenage girl, asks the obvious question. *How??*

The angel replies, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you... The Holy one to be born will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David... his kingdom will never end.*

God is fulfilling a promise he made long ago. This much we know. A promise made to a shepherd boy become king. A promise that his throne would be established forever.

But could we also describe this event upon which all of history hinges as a homecoming?

The Incarnation, God taking on human flesh, becoming one of us, to save us—this is when God finally shows us where he belongs!

The God who made heaven and earth, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the one who gives life and breath to everything, the one whose for whom the earth itself is a footstool....

... takes up residence not in the magnificent temples that human beings long to build, but in the womb of a teenage Palestinian peasant girl. Not in elaborate architectural structures, but in a fragile human body—a *baby*, of all things!

This is not to say that architecture and beautiful buildings are bad. They are reflections of the creative capacities of human beings and one of the ways that we express our hunger for beauty. But they are not God's home.

We see in the first chapter of Luke that the answer to the question, "Where is God's home?" is quite simple.

God's home in with us.

Emmanuel, God *with us*, comes to share the human condition, to transform and redeem and liberate and heal our wounds, to expose and judge our falsity and pride, to cure us of our impulses of religious grandeur, to rehabilitate our conceptions of how God works and the kind of home that God deserves!

Isn't this just like God?

Steve Bell puts this basic truth about who God is beautifully in a song called "Descent," where he borrows the poetry of Malcolm Guite.

In it, he contrasts the God definitively made known in Jesus Christ with the "other gods" on offer in the ancient world. I want to read a few lines:

*They sought to soar into the skies
Those classic gods of high renown
For lofty pride aspires to rise
But you came down.*

*You dropped down from the mountains sheer
Forsook the eagle for the dove
The other Gods demanded fear
But you gave love*

....

*They towered above our mortal plain,
Dismissed this restless flesh with scorn,
Aloof from birth and death and pain,
But you were born.*

*Born to these burdens, borne by all
Born with us all 'astride the grave'
Weak, to be with us when we fall,
And strong to save.*

Human beings have always longed for more impressive gods than Jesus of Nazareth.

Lofty pride aspires to rise...

But God came down. God always comes *down*, in order to reorient and recalibrate our understanding of greatness.

God is at home with human beings. This is the story of Christmas. But it's only half of the story.

The other half is this: *Are we, will we be at home with God?*

God makes his home in human skin not just as a way to teach us what God is truly like, but in order to teach us to make our home with him.

God becomes like us to show us how to become like him.

What does it look like to be "at home" with God?

Peter Scazzero is a pastor/author from New York who wrote a book called *The Emotionally Healthy Church*.

In this book, he lists a number of "results"—things that would come to characterize us as followers of Jesus if we were finally "at home" with God. I won't share the whole list, but here are a few.

If we are at home with God...

- We become compassionate as our Father in heaven is compassionate...
- We become quicker to forgive.
- We have a greater heart for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized, and the wounded.
- We are less covetous, less idolatrous... Life is stripped of its pretense and nonessentials.

- We are liberated from having to impress others.
- We are able to live more comfortably with mystery.
- We are characterized by a greater humility and vulnerability.
- We place God at the center of our lives and begin rejecting superficial, trivial pursuits.
- We experience an enhanced sense of living in the immediate present.
- We enjoy a new vivid appreciation of the basic facts of life—the changing seasons, the wind, the falling of leaves, the last Christmas, people made in God’s image.
- We have fewer fears and a greater willingness to take risks.
- We are kinder. A love flows out of us that is not based on people’s intelligence, success, money, appearance, or expressions of love for us. People no longer feel evaluated, judged, or analyzed by us. They do not feel controlled.

I’m sure you could think of other things to add to this list. But I think this is *part* of what it looks like to become at home with God.

At the end of the book of Revelation, John describes his vision of the new heaven and the new earth. I want to read a few portions of Rev. 21.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “**Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.** They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God...

This is followed by a long passage describing the splendour of the city, with jewelled gates, and decorated foundations, and all kinds of brilliant images. And then this, in verse 22:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

I did not see a temple...

In the new creation, there will be no more monuments to the pride that aspires to rise, no more attempts to climb high enough to reach the God who has come down to be with his people.

Why?

Because the Lamb *is* the temple. Because God's dwelling place is now *among* the people. Because we and God are finally home with each one another.

Which is the what a teenaged girl and her frightened fiancé would discover...

What a collection of rugged shepherds and astrologers would discover...

What all who would open their hearts to the Son of David, born in a manger would discover.

Christmas is the time when God answers the question of where he belongs definitively. He belongs with us.

May we, in response to this humility and this love, be people who are always seeking to find our home with the one who has made his home with us.

Amen.

