

The Road Home

2 Samuel 7:1-11; 16; Luke 1:26-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

December 20, 2020/Fourth Sunday of Advent

My sermon title this morning is “The Road Home.” Christmas is obviously a time of year where the word “home” looms large in our imaginations.

There is this Hallmark ideal 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.

But on this last Sunday of Advent 2020 the word “home” feels different. Many are sick of our homes by now! We’ve seen quite enough of them by this point in the year! Many would love to get out on the road to anywhere but home by now!

So, what is home?

In more ordinary times, the word “home” conjures up all kinds of things in our minds. Perhaps it’s the place where we were born or spent the formative years of our lives.

Maybe it’s the place where we have hung our hat for the most consecutive years.

Maybe “home” is the first place you received a welcome or the place where you first found stable employment and settled down.

Perhaps it’s the place you find yourself going back to often, even if only in your mind. Maybe it’s where nostalgia hangs out in your brain.

Or maybe—and this is the best meaning of the word—home is where many of the people you love happen to be.

“Home” means many things to us in many different ways, depending on who we are, what our experiences have been, and also what’s going on in the world (a pandemic, for example!).

How do we think about the word “home” in connection with 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.

There has been a long and 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, it already feels like a kind of concession, something God grudgingly allows, but has no need of.

Even as the temple is being dedicated in Jerusalem, Solomon says these words:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built (1 Kings 8:27)!

God has no need or desire for an opulent home built by human hands.

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

“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. 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).

What God desires—what God has always desired—is a people who reflect his creational intentions.

Fast forward a millennium 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*, Yahweh 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 (2 Sam 7:16).

But I wonder, 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, where he is at home.

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 for whom the earth itself is a footstool....

This God takes up residence not in the magnificent temples that human beings long to build, but in the womb of a teenage peasant girl. Not in elaborate architectural structures, but in a fragile human body

Many Eastern Orthodox churches have an icon of Mary above the altar at the front of the sanctuary. It shows Mary facing the viewer directly, usually depicted full length with her hands stretched out and up, and with the image of Christ as a child in front of her chest, also facing the viewer directly.

A Greek liturgy that reflects on this icon of Mary contains a phrase that is translated “more spacious than the heavens.” It’s meant to poetically convey the idea that Mary’s womb and spirit became the very dwelling place of God.

God has no need of elaborate furnishings. What We see in the first chapter of Luke is that the answer to the question, “Where is God’s home?” is quite simple.

God’s home is 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 grandeur, to rehabilitate our conceptions of how God works and the kind of home that God deserves.

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 God.

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

One of the best descriptions of what I think it would be like to be “at home with God comes from pastor and author Peter Scazzero.

Here is a partial list. 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 the God.

And yet even this does not tell the whole story.

I said “half of the story” is God’s making his home with us and the other half is our seeking to become at home with God and God’s way in the world.

This way of describing things could leave the impression that the life of faith is kind of a 50/50 deal. God does half the work, and we do the other half. As if it’s kind of an equal partnership.

The good news of Christmas is that this is not, in fact the case. Christmas, like Easter, is about God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

It is about God entering the story and introducing a twist. It is about God surprising his people and confounding expectations and giving us a whole new window into what love looks like.

It is about light and life appearing in an unlikely place, in improbable circumstances, and at an unexpected time. It is about hope arriving when hope is in short supply. It’s about a gift of grace that is given, not a reward that is earned.

Boy, could we use that reminder at the end of 2020, of all years! This has been a year where we have been reminded of our fragility in so many ways. A year where so much has seemed uncertain. A year where, for many, hope and joy have been hard to come by.

We could use a divine surprise, couldn’t we?

I read crime novels from time to time and one author I like to read is Louise Penny (Armand Gamache series). I finished her most recent book called *All the Devils are Here* on Thursday and was just casually picking through the Afterword when I read a passage that stopped me in my tracks.

She was talking about the circumstances around writing the novel, which is set in Paris. She had to go to Paris frequently for research and she recalled the first time she had seen the beautiful city with her late husband Michael (who had surprised her with the trip):

And there was the Eiffel Tower. Lit up in the night sky.

As long as I live, I will never forget that moment. Seeing the Eiffel Tower with Michael. And the dear man, knowing the magic of it for a woman who never thought she'd see Paris, made it ever more magical by making it a surprise.

C.S. Lewis wrote that we can create situations in which we are happy, but we cannot create joy. It just happens.

That moment, I was surprised by complete and utter joy.

A little more than a year earlier I knew that the best of life was behind me. I could not have been more wrong. In that year, I'd gotten sober, met and fell in love with Michael, and was now in Paris.

We just don't know. The key is to keep going. Joy might be just around the corner.¹

This seemed to me a whisper of encouragement from God himself. Perhaps you can hear it this way yourself.

Keep going. Even after a year as hard as this one has been. You never know when joy might surprise you. You never know how God might turn the story—your story, my story, the church's story, the big story we're all a part of—in a new and hopeful direction!

All we do know is that God specializes in surprises. Christmas proves it. Who could ever have imagined God taking up residence in human flesh?

The road home is less a journey we have to make to find God or reach God, much less impress God or earn God's favour. The road home is more of a realization that God has already made his home among us and that because of this, joy is always around the corner.

¹ Louise Penny, *All the Devils are Here* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2020).

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.

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.

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

Christmas is the time when God answers the question of where he belongs definitively. He belongs with us. He is *for* us. Because of him, hope and joy are always just around the corner.

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.

