

May 10, 2020
Fifth Sunday of Easter

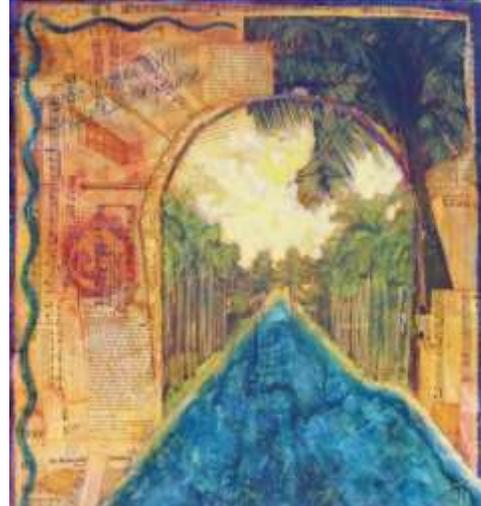
Eighth Sunday of Livestream worship

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Jeremiah 31:7-11
John 14:1-3

Finding Home

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.
John 14:2a



River of Life, mixed media by Joan Thompson, contemporary

*See, I am going to bring them [home] ... gather them ...
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back.*

That was God's pledge to the scattered people of Israel in the early 6th century BC. God made a promise of home – and put it in the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah. God's promise to a people distanced by war and hungry for a connection to home. The message was simple – God said: Your exile is over; I'm going to bring you home.

Five hundred years later the descendants of those returnees met the long-promised Messiah. Jesus had been with them for 30 years, three of those years in a public ministry proclaiming the reign of God, preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching, preaching, and blessing the children. He healed the sick, and forgave sinners, and called all people to repent and believe the gospel.

Now their time with him was nearly over. It was Holy Week. Jesus had come to Jerusalem amid shouts of praise and loud Hosannas. He'd eaten the Passover with them and then wrapped a towel around his waist, bent over and washed their feet, telling them:

*I am only with you a little while longer ...
Where I am going you cannot come.
I give you a new commandment that you love one another...
as I have loved you... love one another.¹*

Wait... what?! Peter spoke up first, "Lord, we would follow you anywhere. What do you mean 'Where I'm going you cannot follow?!'" Listen to Jesus' answer. This is John 14:1-3.

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe in God, believe also in me.*

*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.
If it were not so, would I have told you
that I go to prepare a place for you?
And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come again and will take you to myself,
so that where I am, there you may be also.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Where was your first home? Mine was a tiny apartment in the Brookwood Hills neighborhood of Atlanta. I don't remember it. Our family moved shortly after I was born.

Our first house as a married couple was a manse – a church-owned parsonage with lots of bedrooms and a fabulous fenced backyard, chartreuse green shag carpet, knotty pine cabinets stained bright orange, very pink stove, sink, oven, tile and countertops, and pink and orange flower power wallpaper. That house was “groovy” ... only in the mid-80's.

Our first house in Florida had French doors that opened to catch the breeze off the screened lanai. The only problem with that house was that alligators from the nearby lake would stroll through the backyard.

One of them fell in love with the life-size alligator raft floating in our next-door neighbors' pool. The poor reptile spent hours staring longingly at the toy through the screen enclosure, which would have been funny except that our children were little, so we couldn't let them play outside for fear of becoming an alligator snack.

Nothing's perfect. No home is perfect – mothers know that better than anyone.

As our days of quarantine are added one to another, like a string of pearls, we are getting up close and very familiar with our homes, and those who live in them. For those of us who love where we live, quarantine can be a time of renewal and peace, for quiet reflection and family bonding; a chance to go to work in our pajamas and worship on the sofa.

Our homes have literally become our sanctuaries, the spaces where we do much more than eat and sleep and laundry. Today, home is also our church, school, office, and gym.

A lot of that is good. Home ought to always be a safe and sacred space, full of holy moments, laughter, creativity, and clutter.

When my husband and I moved into our current house, a group of pastor friends from the presbytery offered to come over and bless our home. That was right; it helped us to see our home as sacred space, wonderfully imperfect, God's house.

But for many who live in crowded, conflicted, and dangerous homes, this is not the case. Abused children, spouses, and seniors may be quarantined with their abusers. For our low income and

disabled neighbors, those struggling with addiction, or experiencing homelessness – home is no sanctuary, and these are dangerous days.

Woods has a long history of responding in crisis situations, and right now we've stepped up our efforts to help. You saw just one example this morning in the Mask Drive video, but there are dozens more efforts currently underway, providing emergency food, shelter, help with utilities, rent, and counseling.

You can get involved by clicking the "I Want to Help," and the "Give" buttons in Thursday's Messenger e-newsletter, or on today's worship invitation, and on our website. Your support makes a big difference, so please be as generous as you can. Give online, or mail in your offering; give over-and-above if you are able because this crisis is unprecedented.

These efforts are not just for and by our members. For thousands in our community Woods Church is our heart's true home. Although we are separated by distance, we are united and rock solid in our commitment to love. There is a place for everyone at Woods, and everyone has something to share. Jesus said:

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places,

For a long time I assumed he was talking about heaven, eternal life in the Father's house, and he is. But, as usual, it's more than that, more than a promise of the sweet by and by.

Here's what I realize now...Jesus has also prepared a place for me and for you in his house today.

There's only one other time in the English Bible that Jesus uses the phrase *in my Father's house*. The Greek is not precisely the same, but the meaning is similar. It's in Luke 2; Jesus is 12-years old. He and his family have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. He's separated from the group. His family began frantically searching for him in the crowded city. Mary is angry. When they finally find him she says, "Why have you done this to us?" His answer is startling. He says:

*Why were you searching for me in all those other places?
Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?*ⁱⁱ

Jesus isn't talking about Joseph's house and he's not talking about heaven. He's in the sanctuary; he means the Temple.

This is *my Father's house*. *I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord."*ⁱⁱⁱ I pray we will be together soon in God's house. I can only imagine how much you miss it.

In a few minutes we are going to celebrate some things that have happened since we've been away – the Renew Capital Campaign work and Property Ministry will share a video about what's going on in our Father's house during quarantine -- how we are making it greener, more efficient, welcoming, and beautiful!

We know that Woods is not God's only home. The world is God's home, and Woods has a hallowed place in it. Pray that God will hasten the day when we will be together again. Then, take the time to notice the presence of God in your own home. Discover God in the ordinary moments.

As the song says, "This is my Father's World" all nature sings the music of the spheres. Jesus not only brings us to God, he also brings God to us!

There is a final, classical aspect to this passage. It's about what lies beyond this world. I wish he'd given us more details about what happens after we die. It would make us a lot less fearful.

What he told us is that he has gone to prepare a place for us, so that where he is, we may be also. Maybe that's all we need to know.

At its core, faith is choosing to believe what we cannot see, taste, smell, touch, hear. Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Reformed theologian, used to joke about Christians who claim to know all about the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell^{iv} and the guest list at both places!

Heaven is surely not what's described in thousands of jokes, movies, stories, and songs. In the end heaven is a wonderful mystery and a sweet anticipation, easier for some to envision than for others.

Maybe you've heard the story of the twins who were having a conversation in the womb.

Baby 1 announced to his brother: "I believe in life after birth."

"That's ridiculous," Baby 2 replied, "this womb is all there is. It's perfect: warm, dark and cozy. We have nothing to do all day but float and cling to the chords that feed us."

Baby 1 insisted, "No! There must be something beyond this dark place. I know there's a place with light, where there is freedom to move." But he could not convince his brother. "I have something else to say," Baby 1 finally announced, "and I'm afraid you're not going to like it, but here it is -- I think there is a Mother."

"What?!" Baby 2 scoffed, "a Mother?! What are you talking about? Have you ever seen a Mother? No, of course you haven't seen her and neither have I! So stop thinking about all that, Brother. Why would you want more? This womb is not so bad. After all, we have everything we need."

Baby 1 was quite overwhelmed by his brother's response, and for a while he didn't dare say anything more. But he couldn't let go of the thought, and since he had no one else to talk to, he finally said, "Do you feel those squeezes every once in a while? They're quite uncomfortable and sometimes painful."

"Yes," said Baby 2, "I feel them."

"Well," said Baby 1, "I think those squeezes are getting us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see the Mother face-to-face. Isn't that exciting!?"

Baby 2 didn't answer.^v

It's hard – to imagine what we cannot see. There's a lot we don't know about life after death – but here's what we do know: Jesus has gone to prepare a home for us so that where he is we will be also.

Decades after that night in the Upper Room, John of Patmos had a vision of a new Heaven and a new Earth. He heard a loud voice saying:

*See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them ... [and]
wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”
And the one who was seated on the throne said,
'See, I am making all things new.'*

Is that what is happening to us now? COVID is changing us, there's no doubt about that. This once-in-a-century experience has already changed who we are. Economists to educators to epidemiologists are calling this pandemic a hinge event of history.

What happens next will be our choice. We can close our minds or open our imaginations. We can rush back to the way things were, or we can pause to reflect on how things ought to be. We can allow the grief over all we have lost to COVID-19 make us more defensive, selfish, self-aggrandizing, and afraid. Or we can let all that we've been through make us stronger, more open, faithful, bold, and compassionate. The choice is yours, and mine.

Jesus could not have been clearer about what he wants. He said:

*Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe ...believe in God, believe also in me.
In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.
If it were not so would I have told you
that I go to prepare a place for you?*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ John 13:33-35

ⁱⁱ Luke 2:49

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 122:1

^{iv} Reinhold Niebuhr by Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, 212

^v James C. Howell, *Birth: Pastoring for Life Theological Wisdom for Pastoring Well*, + Baker Academic, 2020