12-2/3-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13 Home is Where We Meet Advent “Coming Home”

Every year my family asks me, “so whose house are you going to for Christmas this year?”

Before we had kids, Ken and I would travel to see both sides of the family in the same week. Considering our families are in Franklin and near Akron, that was quite a bit of travel in one week. After the kids came along, we simplified our travel plans and alternated Thanksgiving and Christmas each year for our family celebrations.

Alternating families was not new to me. My sister Jen and I did the same thing growing up, alternating between our mom and our dad. Occasionally, however, since the family celebrations were so close, often happening in Middletown and Miamisburg, we could score two turkey dinners in one day, or two times in one day to open presents. Whoever we were with, the holiday was a day of family coming together.

Maybe it’s nostalgia. Maybe it’s family expectations. Maybe it’s tradition. Christmas is still the top ranked holiday for people to come home. How many come home for the 4th of July or Labor Day? Christmas is the day many still yearn to be together. How many of us here today still go home for the holidays, wherever home may be, or have family who come home to us here in Springboro?

Nowadays, however, with families scattered across the country and even around the world, and with work schedules and even sports schedules that rarely take off for the holidays, I have heard more and more families that come together on days other than Dec 25th or the 4th Thursday in November. Maybe they get together on a Saturday in Dec. I think our neighbors gathered together today/yesterday. Maybe they get together for new year’s bowl games.

No matter when they meet, the yearning to be together as a family is still there.

Jackson Henry once said coming “down home” is more a state of mind than a specific place.

Where he is from in Appalachia, home may be the family homestead, or grandma’s place, or the town you grew up in, yet for most people it is more about the relationships than the place.

You come down home for the familiar bonds of community. You come down home to meet those who love you and care for you, even if you argue and disagree. They are still family.

-umcdiscipleship.org 2017

Mr. Henry reminds us that no matter where we are from, from Kentucky to Boston to Seattle to Springboro, the bonds of family can be what draws us together more than any specific location.

Those bonds may be between your family or origin, or a small group of close knit friends, or a familiar congregation.

Whenever I worship at First UMC Middletown, I know that I am welcomed home with many hugs from those who helped raise me in the faith. They were extended family to me, and that church was literally like a second home. Yes, nowadays there are many people there I don’t know, like extended family you meet only once a year at a family reunion. At a family reunion while we may greet one another, we have no idea how we are related and may not even know one another’s names. Yet, still we are family. At a family reunion we are connected by blood and marriage; within a congregation we are connected by God’s love.

Within a congregation, or more broadly, as members of the church universal, we share a common home, with common faith stories that remind us who and whose we are. These are the stories of faith proclaimed through word and song every time we gather for worship.

How many of us have memories tied to specific hymns, especially at Christmastime? How many of us have learned the story of Jesus’ birth through songs such as *The First Noel* or *What Child is This*?

During this season of Advent, these weeks leading up to our celebration of Christ’s coming at Christmas, we will eventually sing *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night*, yet before then we will ponder how all the earth is waiting for the Promised One, and recognize that Jesus’ coming was long expected. We will remember that Jesus came into a world of sin and despair, a world which today still longs for peace on earth and goodwill toward all.

Last Sunday we began the journey of Advent early with a psalm of lament from Psalm 80, which mourned that the Northern Kingdom had been wiped out and the Southern Kingdom was in danger of exile due to turning away from the Lord. Yet the psalmist still proclaimed hope, hope that God would restore God’s people by God’s abundant love and grace.

This Sunday the psalmist in Psalm 85 proclaims that God has indeed been faithful to God’s very nature as well as God’s promises, and the people of God have been restored. The Southern Kingdom was sent into exile in Babylon, but now a remnant has returned to Jerusalem. They are now back home in the Promised Land, even if that land was full of rubble and the Temple lay in ruins.

The remnant that returned realized that God was still with them, no matter where they were or what they faced. They gave thanks for all that God had done for their ancestors, and what God had done for them. They gave thanks that their lives -and more importantly their faith- had been restored, as God had also forgiven them of their sins.

If you were to write your own psalm today,

In what ways are you thankful for God’s forgiving grace?

Can you name some of the sins God has forgiven in your life?

How have you personally experienced God’s love?

Can you recall how God has cherished you in spite of your sins?

The remnant of Israel that returned to Jerusalem from Babylon gave thanks to God not only for all that God had done, but they also gave thanks for their hope in God’s presence with them in all of their tomorrows. They clung to such hope because they trusted in God’s character, and trusted God to continue to be God. Theologian Philip Melancthon once said to know Christ is to know Christ’s benefits. For us to know God is also to experience God’s saving acts.

--Rolf Jacobson 12-7-08 workingpreacher.org

God did not just act among our faith ancestors generations ago; God is also acting within our lives today. So we, too, can trust in God being God, knowing that these attributes of God listed in today’s psalm have not changed.

God still is God. We still are sinful human beings. Yet God loves us anyway, and forgives us, and frees us for new life. What we do with such a choice depends on our attitude and behaviors.

Will we approach life and its struggles with despair or with hope? It all depends on one’s perspective.

Consider the perspectives of two shoe company salespersons sent to a remote country. The first one, when he arrived, was dismayed because everyone went barefooted. So he wired the company, “No prospect for sales. People don’t wear shoes here.” Later another salesman went to the same area. He too immediately sent word to the home office. But his telegram read, “Great potential! People don’t wear shoes here!”

-adapted from David Mosser “A Real Homecoming” based on Is 35 preaching.com

We can look at the world around us, and the dismal state of our world, our church and dare I even say our lives today, and lift up a cry of despair. Or we can look at the struggles of the world around us, and live by hope that God promises to be with us. While our circumstances may not change, our attitude certainly will if we believe that God is with us in our joys and in our struggles.

..A little boy named Danny once lived with his family in a trailer. One day someone asked the boy, “Don’t you wish you had a real home?” Danny’s reply was wise beyond his years. He said, “We have a real home. We just don’t have a house to put it in.”

A house and a home are very different. A house is just a physical structure, made perhaps of brick or wood or stone. It can be large or small. It may not have persons inside. If a house does not include persons, the house is not really a home.

By contrast, a home is a haven of shelter, acceptance and unconditional love. It includes at least one person whether they live in a shack or a mansion. In a home, each person’s value is unlimited, and their mutual commitment is forever. Any decent contractor can construct a house, but only God can build a home.

--from Bill Bouknight, “Just a Thought” on preaching.com

The story of Christmas is a story of God making God’s home among mortals. The gift of Jesus is the gift of God with us, even in the midst of our messy, imperfect lives.

Our salvation is a gift from God, a forgiveness of our sins not only for eternal life, but also for this life. Salvation is also the restoration of us as God’s people here and now. And salvation is summarized by the very nature of God.

The psalmist imagines the qualities of God’s nature in vivid language-

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet.

Righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

God’s steadfast love is expressed in God’s covenantal commitment to God’s people. This agape love is not dependent on what we do, but on who God is. And we can trust that God will be faithful to such love for us.

Peace is always dependent on righteousness, for peace cannot exist in the face of injustice. The image of kissing one another is not a romantic kiss, but a fastening together that links them, that binds them, one to another.

As one American leader said in the mid-20th century, "Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin." The speaker was not a peace activist or antiestablishment radical. He was Dwight David Eisenhower, five-star general in the U.S. Army and 34th president of the United States.

--“Restore Us O God: Peace” 12-4-11 homileticsonline.com

Without love and faithfulness and righteousness, there will be no peace. This is evident in our world today, and evident in our lives. Is it any wonder that so many Christmas carols yearn for peace?

Today’s psalm invites us to find our peace in God, to trust in God’s promises, and to find our home in God’s presence. No matter what we have done, or how far we have strayed from God’s ways, God calls us home again today, to trust in God’s nature, to rest in God’s presence, to live by faith in God’s Son Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us.

Today we look back at our faith ancestors, and even our own lives, to remember where we have come from. We also remember God’s great love for us. Today we also look ahead into the future, even beginning simply with tomorrow, trusting God’s own presence to guide us on this journey of life and faith.

In a few minutes we are also invited to meet God in a tangible way, at the table of holy communion. Through the bread and the cup we are invited once more to come home to God, to trust in God’s steadfast love and forgiving grace, to be renewed by God’s faithfulness and peace, and to respond to such gifts of God through the renewal of our faith in God’s Son Jesus.

As we continue on this journey of Advent, may we draw closer to God and closer to one another. May we find our home in God, and dwell together with God’s people. May we trust in God’s nature, and share glimpses of God’s love and forgiveness, hope and peace within our lives and our relationships. May we live by faith, now and always.

May it be so. Let us pray.