

THE STORY OF GOD: Home and Spirit

John 14:23-29

We can admit that homelessness continues to be a difficult issue to resolve. It seems clear, however, that a principle solution to the issue is to be found in creating homes. We do not label persons about which we are concerned as “shelterless” for shelters are available, even if they present themselves in the form of a flimsy tent under a freeway overpass. Nor do we term such persons to be “unhoused,” though they are often without a residence in the terms we normally consider. The truth is that such people, these people whom call “homeless,” often have multiple difficulties, only some of their own creation. But regardless of the reasons, such men and women and, increasingly, children are without house or shelter and seemingly most important, without home.

Home appears to be a central yearning in our world. The thought of it remains though one has moved far away from a particular site. Generations speak of a homeland and it is often not place where they presently reside. The desire for home is firmly fixed in society, causing, in some places, the value of particular buildings to escalate beyond the economic reach of many. Home is more than a building, but many desire a building in order to have a home.

The thought of home informs the reading from John. The one who will come to extend the ministry of Jesus will make its home with the world and its peoples. In the word expressed in translation, the Spirit will abide. It would appear, then, that the story of God will include home and spirit, both evidences of God’s continuing love for the world.

Today we have baptized. Rather, God has baptized this child into the family of God through the work of the Spirit that is called forth out of and into the life of Moriah. As the water is poured, as the words of baptism are spoken, we recognize that God’s grace is inhabiting her life even as we remember that it is at home with us as well.

In two weeks, as we celebrate the advent of the Spirit in wind and fire, Annika and Madeline, Aaron, Hannah, and Joshua will be offered an opportunity to affirm his or her baptism. Each has been baptized but so early in life that she or he has no memory of it. Water will be poured into open hands and they will be each called to “remember your baptism”. It is not that they will be able to recall the experience that took place so long ago. Rather, they will be invited to bring forth this life-giving word and water into their own time, interpreting it out of their own experiences of God and grace. And they will be with family, for this congregation will join them in remembering, parents perhaps recalling the

baptism of a son or daughter, but most rejoicing that we are a community that receives the grace of baptism every time we remember, often as one is named as part of the family of God, as one becomes a brother or sister in Christ.

The portion of John heard today is part of a longer composition that has come to be known as the Farewell Discourse. That is, Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure from this life; they will soon be separated by violent death, though crucifixion will not be the end of God's work in the person of Jesus, even as it does not end his life in them. As they open themselves to the Risen Christ, the Spirit, the Advocate, the one through whom God speaks will continue to make its home with them.

Jesus proclaims that another will be sent to them and abide with them to take up the redeeming work of Christ in the world, and disciples come to understand that this ministry will often be undertaken by the church. Such encouraging words have become a call to the church to make its home with God. The irony is that God has already fully at home with the world as expressed by the Son who incarnates the Word of God. The question may be how shall we be at home with God?

Thus the second element of both baptism and confirmation. In the laying on of hands, we invite, even urge, the Holy Spirit to inhabit the life of this child in such a way that she "may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ". Those who confirm the faith into which they were baptized become professing members of the congregation. That is, they take up the choice and challenge to be followers of Jesus in ways that express their faith in this congregation and, more importantly in the community and world. It will be comfortable for these young people to join with others in sharing faith within the family of this congregation, though the specific words of faith may be difficult to compose. Though we are not a people who hold fast to a particular creed, statements of faith such as the Apostles Creed often provide language to be used in professing understanding of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of the Church.

But the ease of announcing that "We believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth...and in Jesus Christ...and in the Holy Spirit.." is replaced with the difficulty of adapting these beliefs to present situations. Indeed, how does this belief in the nature of God impact the need to be discovered in this world, in this time? How does our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit guide and empower our response to the homeless in our community, the refugee in our world? Often young people in confirmation classes breathe a sigh of relief when the program ends and they offer themselves to a baptismal faith as though they there is nothing more to be done to be a member of the church. They are, however, quite aware that building faith---that is confirmation---is a lifelong

process, one led by the Holy Spirit which makes its home in their lives.

One of our Sunday morning gatherings is investigating a movement within the global church called Fresh Expressions. The central motivation of the movement is to reach out to “new people in new places.” These “new people” are not those who currently occupy the pews. They are the “nones and dones”, those who profess no faith and often no interest in religion and those who are “done” with the church that has disappointed and sometimes abused them. The “nones” increasing in size in every with every generation with the “dones” adding to the numbers who do not participate in formal religion. The Gallup poll and others investigations of American life report that over the last two decades, participation in church has declined by 10% in every generation with the lack of interest accelerating in recent years, particularly among the younger generations. This may be a cause for lament though we may be called to view this as a call to new ways of being church. Though people still yearn for an experience of God, this yearning remaining fairly steady in these same polls, church and synagogue and temple may not be the place where this desire will be met.

This lessening of interest in church aligns with a general disengagement in society. Harvard Professor Robert Putnam wrote a book twenty years ago entitled “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” in which he argues that “Americans have been engaging less and less in communal activities such as bowling leagues, Rotary clubs, gardening clubs, or book clubs, since the 1960s.” [Christian Century, May 22, 2019, p. 18] Any who have participated in community organizations know the difficulty in attract new members to the club. Increasingly, we are going it alone though such isolation does not always serve us well. We, too, may be becoming “homeless” in our world, detached from significant interactions with others, separated from one another even in the midst of growing populations, alone in a world increasingly filled with people

And yet, on this day, Moriah receives the waters of baptism. And soon, five young people will likely be confirmed, although we recognize that the choice to affirm their baptismal faith belongs to them. People do continue to seek God, for others and for themselves. We need not fear the loss of the work of God’s Spirit. It may merely be moving in places beyond the local church, among people whom we are called to serve. We may need to discover such places and be confident that there, we will encounter people who are eager for good news of love and peace.

Disciples in the time of Jesus feared separation from him. Jesus calls them not only to keep the command to love as central to their activities but declares that they will not be left alone. Another will come to be with them forever---the Spirit of truth. This promise will be sufficient to encourage them to continue to build kingdom wherever they find themselves to be. It will also call them to new places

where they will encounter new people, people who seek light and hope, people who seek God. This is the story of God, for God has made a home with us.

Just as this truth has been sufficient to sustain and empower disciples in every age, so we can make our home with this promise, this Spirit, this God who will send us out into the world to be gospel in every place we might find ourselves to be. For the waters of baptism, for professions of faith, for the work of the Spirit, thanks be to God. Amen.