

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 20, 2020
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 and Luke 1:26-38

Home. This year, that word has resonated on many different levels. For some, home is a place in which they feel trapped by the restrictions of the pandemic. For others it is the only place of retreat in which they can feel fully safe. For most people, I expect, “home” continues to elicit a mixed bag of emotions; on some days home feels cozy, and on other days it feels claustrophobic.

This past year has transformed some extroverts into contented introverts. On the other hand, some introverts have found the ongoing solitude too demanding and wish for in-person companionship. Others long for solitude when tensions within the bubble of home grow annoying or even dangerous.

They talk about the “simple pleasures of home,” but in truth the concept of “home” is not always simple.

In today’s first reading from Samuel, we hear what is referred to as the Oracle of Nathan. And that’s not simple either. In the first part of the reading, King David points out to the prophet Nathan that while he, David, was living in a fine house of Cedar, the ark of the Tabernacle, the very dwelling place of God, was still in a tent. Nathan gives King David the thumbs up to go ahead with his implied plan to build God a proper home to dwell in.

But God appears to Nathan in a dream that night and gives him a message for David. God says, listen, whether I was in a tent or a tabernacle, I have always been with the people of Israel since their flight from Egypt. Did I ever ask any of the tribal leaders to build me a house of cedar?

God is, perhaps, pushing back against the idea that God can be contained in a building; trying to forestall religious folks developing what others before me have joking called an Edifice Complex.

Expressed in this passage is a mutual desire to shelter each other. David wants to build God a house, and God says no, I want to build you a house. But when using this same Hebrew word for ‘house,’ God is speaking about the establishment of David’s dynasty, in which the people of Israel will find safety and rest – two very important qualities every home should have.

This reading and the Gospel reading tell us something about what can happen when we give God space. Not space in a building, but in our lives. We get a glimpse of the transformative power of offering hospitality to God. Now, only Mary could claim to have literally provided shelter to God. But one of my favourite Christmas images I have seen on the internet is the Holy Family on a starlit village street with a caption that reads “Each of us is an innkeeper who decides if there is room for Jesus.”

Pre-pandemic, our well-intentioned hopes to meet up with friends or family over coffee or dinner often got crowded out by the mundane, time-consuming tasks of life. And our commitment to create hospitable space for God is often neglected as well.

It may have been in the St. Clement's archives that I saw a great slogan being employed in a long-ago stewardship campaign. Written at the top of the pledge card that year was "Give what's right, not what's left." It was talking about money, not time, but it works equally well for both. If we truly intend to create space for God in our lives, we have to give what's right, not what's left.

This is, of course, one of the 10 Commandments. But the command to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy is often ignored. And that's a shame. Because when we keep the Sabbath, we give what is right. We create space for play, and rest, and enjoyment of God's creation. We give the first day of the week over to God's time, not the last.

It seems that there is a resurgence in the concept of Sabbath, even among non-religious people who talk about incorporating "tech Sabbaths" into their week by unplugging all their computers and devices for a few hours or a whole day. Many books have been written in latter years about modern ways of introducing Sabbath time into one's life.

Over this past eight or nine months, people have had the opportunity to experiment with different ways of building Sabbath moments, if not days, into their routine. I, for one, having been liberated from my early-morning commute, have finally been successful in incorporating a service of morning prayer into my daily practice. But even then, I can let it get pushed aside or minimized when other demands intrude. Some mornings, I am still giving God what is left, not what is right.

I remembered recently that the daily offices such as morning prayer, noonday prayer and vespers are also called "fixed-hour prayer." One of my prayer books notes, for example, that morning prayer is to be said on the hour or half-hour between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. For someone like me, who was accustomed to timing morning prayer around my coffee intake, this seemed unnecessarily monastic in its expectations.

But I tried it a few mornings, and the power of fixed-hour prayer was suddenly obvious. When your commitment is to saying morning prayer at 7 a.m., your idle scrolling of the newsfeed on your phone must cease. Your email must go unread, at least for a time. You time your coffee around the prayer, instead of your prayer around the coffee. Suddenly, with this one small shift, you are putting God first. You are offering hospitality to the divine with intention, as the first fruits of your morning instead of with the dregs of the time remaining. This is Sabbath time.

Traditionally the Jewish Friday evening Shabbat begins when the third star can be seen in the night sky. Here again, people step away from their own human-made agendas and create space for God on a schedule that is not their own.

If we offer God shelter, God will provide shelter for us. And when that happens it turns out that we are not the only ones who are drawn into the warmth of God's circle. Mark Oakley is the author of *A Splash of Words*, a lovely book that weaves together faith and poetry. He is a priest as well as an author. In the introduction, he writes:

I'm a Shropshire boy by birth and I love returning to what is one of the most beautiful countries of England. There are a lot of sheep in Shropshire and I joked once with an old shepherd that my boss in London had a shepherd's crook a bit like the one he was holding. I asked him if he used it to haul in the naughty stray lambs. "No," he said, "that's not what this is good for. I'll tell you what I do with this crook. I stick it in the ground so deep that I can hold on to it and keep myself so still that eventually the sheep learn to trust me."

If we ground ourselves deeply in God, if we learn to be still and to open the door to God's love and presence, it will have an impact on the people around us as well. The shelter that God gives us – that place of safety and rest – we give by extension to others. We become better listeners. We lose interest in judging. We absorb people's anxieties and we give back a sense of peace.

We can't invite people to dinner this Christmas. But we can, and we should, invite God to the feast. God doesn't want a house of cedar; God wants a home within us. At Christmas – and every day – we decide if we are going to be the innkeeper who finds room for Jesus. Will you give Jesus the best room, the shabby box room, or will you keep your door firmly closed? The answer to that question will determine the course of your life – so let us pray that we have the wisdom to give God what is right, not what is left.

- *The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*

