Sermon for The Feast of Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, June 9, 2019
Text: John 14:8-17
Title: Home sweet home

Home. I wonder what this word conjures up for you. “Home is where the heart is.” “There’s no place like home.” “Home sweet home.” For those among us who come from less stable families of origin, the word home might evoke a more nuanced nostalgia: if “home is not a place but a feeling,” that feeling may be heavy; if “home is where our story begins,” we might be grateful it’s not where our stories end. On the other hand, maybe home was once a place of safety and delight but is no longer, or was a site of dread but is now, in later life, one of cozy warmth and welcome.

And maybe this whole line of thinking is rather confusing, because I seem to be assuming that home is a place, and that may not be true to your experience. A few years into my relationship with my husband, which involved several moves – including one across the country – we started saying to one another in quiet moments, “you are my home.” For me, it was a beautiful relief: this idea that I could always come home to Haamid, no matter where we were; that my home would move with me throughout life and I’d be able to enjoy it in countless times and places. Buildings have their advantages: they tend to last longer than people; they can feel safe and secure and imposing and impressive in ways we generally don’t; they don’t forget to wash the dishes or make the bed. But homing with another person or group of people, as in marriage or monasteries or intentional communities offers so much more than flexibility and mobility. For better or worse, we can’t get lost in a relationship in the way we might a cathedral. We can’t remain anonymous. We can’t hide, from ourselves or one another.

Given how important as our sense of home is to our identity, it ought not surprise us that the question of where God makes God’s home is central to our faith. In seminary, I had a professor who insisted that the single most important belief that distinguished the early Christian community from its Jewish roots, a belief that comes up over and over again, explicitly and implicitly, in the writings of the New Testament, was not the resurrection. It was not the divinity of Jesus. The primary, truly unique theological insight that distinguished our faith early on is that the human person is the new temple of God. This is, ultimately, the radical, transformative,
earth-shaking truth at the heart of our celebration of Pentecost: the coming of the animating, inspiring spirit that breathes in and through us, the mystical body of Christ, from ages to ages, world without end. Once, the dwelling place of the name of the Lord was a tabernacle carried through the wilderness, and then it was a temple in a holy city, and then the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and now, we make this audacious claim that God has traded in the stability and security of stone for the soft vitality of the human heart. God has chosen to make God’s home in us. If we really let that sink in, it’s pretty breathtaking.

And it might make us wonder: if God is content to dwell within the human person, if our unique and flawed and beautiful minds and bodies and spirits are good enough for God, why is it so hard for us to find our own home within? Why we are so often searching and stretching and striving, restless and rugged, as though what we long for most is to be found outside ourselves instead of deeper within?

Today, as we begin the second half of the Church year, we turn from recounting the life of one Jesus of Nazareth – his promised birth and early life, his ministry and passion, his death, resurrection and ascension, all recounted and reenacted through the season of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter – and we come into a season of life, a season fo the Church, with a different focus. Our attention shifts from this singular human person – Jesus – in whom God made a home, in whom God chose to dwell among us - to the corporate person of the Church, in and through whom God makes a holy habitation even unto this day, a mystical body inspired – meaning, breathed, like a body, like the person of Jesus – by God’s own breath. In this sense, the Church’s story – our story – is a continuation of Jesus’ story, because we are, together, called not simply to worship Jesus, but to become him, to enact his very ministry and further his redeeming love in the world.

Catholic priest and wildly popular author Richard Rohr points to the dramatic implications this has for our lives, and for our very understanding of salvation, explaining that Paul’s letters are often mistranslated as telling the early Church to have faith “in” Christ, whereas the Greek more accurately says that we are to have the faith “of” Christ. This means that belief is not about a distant, intellectual assertion but an embodied experience, a sharing and partaking in the very personhood of Jesus. Most people think being Christian means “to believe in Jesus,” Rohr writes. “But, ‘to share in the faith of Jesus’ is a much richer concept … once we know that Jesus is the corporate stand in for everybody, we know we have already been taken on the ride
through death and back to life. All we can do now is make what is objectively true fully conscious.”

This is a daunting and exhilarating invitation – to fully accept, embrace, and rest in what God has already done. To see God’s story as our story. To know God’s home is in us, and then to let ourselves and our lives and our world be transformed by that truth. This means not only seeing God more clearly, but seeing ourselves more clearly. I recently heard a Rabbi who serves a large reformed synagogue in San Francisco share some delightful wisdom from their youngest members that illuminates this. The synagogue, like Christ Church, has a preschool, and different classes occasionally take a tour through their sanctuary with one of the rabbis on staff, who describes the space for them, shares the names of various religious relics and rituals they’ve probably seen in worship without knowing the words for, and answers their questions. This particular rabbi rambled on a bit with one of his groups, and by the time he got to the stage up front where the scrolls of the Torah – the first five books of the Bible – are kept in a special ark, he noticed the teacher signaling to him from the back that they were out of time.

The Torah is an object of tremendous reverence in Jewish communities and is handled in special ways, similar to how only an ordained person carries the Gospel book during our worship, and then typically elevates it over his or her head, carrying it into the gathered assembly, who often bow or turn toward it as a sign of respect. So, the rabbi was sorry not to be able to open the ark for the four year olds and show it to them up close, and he promised them that they could come back in a few weeks and he would pull the curtain aside and they would explore together what was there. He assured them that it was very, very special, and that getting to come back and see it would be a real treat.

The next day the teacher came to him and said that his cliffhanger ending had made quite an impression, inspiring fierce debate among the little learners about what might be hidden behind the curtain. Most of the kids admitted they didn’t know and weren’t too concerned with guessing, but four possibilities had been offered that seemed to hold varying levels of promise. One child, clearly a budding nihilist, said there was nothing there. Another, overly-influenced by the game show phenomenon, guessed that behind the curtain was a new car! A third, perhaps less

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imaginative, said it was some “Jewish holy thing.” (A pretty safe answer, all things considered.)

But the fourth took his breath away. This child was confident the others were all wrong, saying that when “that rabbit man” finally opened the curtain what they’d find there was a giant mirror. “Somehow,” the rabbi reflected, “that little soul knew that through looking at the words of sacred scripture, he would encounter himself in a new and a heightened and revealing way.”

And so it is for us. As we journey into the second half of the year, encountering the stories of our scriptures in the months ahead, practicing being the body of Christ, inhabiting the faith of Jesus together, we’re invited to notice where and how we find ourselves in those stories in some heightened and revealing way. Think of today, starting with our lesson from Genesis. The possibilities are endless! What does the story of the Tower of Babel tell you about your own heart, that unlikely and unexpected nesting place of the holy spirit? What do you know of using your gifts in ways that would raise you up at the expense of others? What do you know of God saving you from a dream which you only realized later would have become a nightmare? What do you know of God making you incomprehensible to those closest to you, or being suddenly estranged from neighbors and friends? Or, in the reading from Acts, what do you know of waiting, like the disciples, for God to come, and when that finally happens feeling only confusion? What do you know of God breaking down the barriers that keep us apart? Of God making sense of the noise around you? What do you know of other’s incredulity at the movements of the Spirit in your life, of being belittled or misunderstood because you had the faith of Jesus and lived accordingly? Or, as in the Gospel, what do you know of being one with the Father? And the Father one with you? Of God dwelling deep within?

These are not simply the stories of people who lives thousands of years ago in faraway places with strange names and unfamiliar tongues. These are the stories of our life in God. They are our stories. And as we are drawn deeper into self-awareness, we come to know God more fully, just as we are drawn deeper into an awareness of God, we come to see ourselves more clearly. May we, at the turning of this season, listen with the faith of Jesus, opening our hearts to be transformed and renewed as they are reflected back to us, until, finally, we realize what has always been true and welcome it as a friend: that home is not to be found in some other place or some other person, no matter how beautiful or beloved. Home is right here, always and already, as we rest in the very heartbeat of God. Amen.