

December 10, 2017: Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)
 Psalm 85: At Home With God

It has been quite an adjustment for me to live and work in Burlington. Well technically I live in Snow Camp. The Church has a Burlington address, but most people say it is in Whitsett. And my work takes me into Gibsonville, and Mcleansville, Alamance, Julian, and Liberty. For someone who grew up twenty minutes from the heart of Washington D.C. it's all country to me. I don't say that in a condescending way, or to suggest I'm not happy here, because I am. I would even go so far as to say I prefer living here over where I'm from. I'm only trying to point out that it is an adjustment. Things are very different.

One thing I point to explain what I mean, and I'm not sure why this always comes to mind, is gravel. I have a gravel driveway. Where I grew up there was either grass, asphalt, or concrete. From my yard I can see horses, deer, hawks, and groundhogs. I can hear goats and cows in the distance. I can smell...well never mind. I've told you all this before. Maybe something I haven't mentioned are the new cultural concepts I have been introduced to.

One is the idea of a home place. The idea that a person my age could point to an existing structure not far from where they live, maybe even next door, and say, "That's where my family began," "That's where grandma grew up," or "That's where I was born." And point to a window and say, "Right there, in that room." I have never seen the homes where any of my grandparents grew up. The home I grew up in is barely recognizable, and hasn't been in the family for twenty-years or more.

The second concept, related to this one, is the idea of family land, land that has been in the same family for decades, even centuries, where adjoining streets are even named after the family, as a testimony to their longevity. Before we built our house we lived on Isley Dr. And I have met some of the Isley's whose family it is named after. Some of them still live on it. When I first arrived here I would be driving around town and noticed roads that share names with some of you. Clapp Farms Road, Greeson Road, Albright Road...and I would immediately slow down, afraid of what some of you might think about my driving habits. I have since learned that there are many Clapps, Greesons and Albrights that do not attend this church. Along these lines, I once overheard a conversation where someone was expressing their complete shock and utter amazement that a friend's son or daughter was getting married and had decided not to build a home and settle down on their family land. I remember thinking what this person was so upset over I had never even heard of until moving here.

I mention all this as kind of a lead in to a conversation about what we mean by the word "home," when we talk about the idea of being at home for Christmas. If you grew up around here, and are familiar with the concepts I mentioned, your initial response might be to think of home as a place, a location, an address. But what if you grew up the way I did?

I lived in the same house from the age of three to eighteen. The summer after I graduated from high school my parents moved to Raleigh. I went away to college. My first time back home was over Thanksgiving Break, and was already beginning to feel unfamiliar to me. Over the years it has become less and less familiar. The house I grew up in is almost completely unrecognizable. Only one of my neighbors still lives in my old neighborhood, and we never got along. A few members of my extended family still live in the area, but most have passed away or moved away. I could go on. If you are wondering, yes, I am in therapy to deal with all of this. I'm not really, but maybe I should be.

My point is, if I were to think of home as a place, I haven't really been home for Christmas in over twenty years. So I've been forced to rethink the whole concept of home. For me, home is where my life intersects with the lives of those closest to me. The place and location is almost irrelevant. Wherever our paths cross. That is home to me.

With all this in mind, I want you to think with me about where, or what, home is when it comes to our relationship with God. If we want to be at home with God this Christmas, what needs to happen?

Again, our first thought might be to associate home with God with a location, with a place. Maybe the first place that comes to mind is heaven. Where is that? We don't really know. All we know is that it's not here. So the next place that comes to mind, is a place, or maybe multiple places, where we remember feeling close to God, where we first came to experience him and know him.

If you grew up in a particular church, maybe even this church, and it is where you were first introduced to God, that could be where you would say, "Right here, here is where I need to be if I want to be at home with God this Christmas." I went to one church for most of my childhood, so I can understand that sentiment. There was another place where I really felt at home with God, our church campground in the middle of Virginia. I went there for two weeks every summer for the first eighteen years of my life. I could certainly say, "that would be a great place to go to be at home with God this Christmas." I'm sure we could all come up with other examples.

But what if that church you grew up in is no longer standing? Or, as in my case, it's still standing, but you don't know hardly any of the people, and it looks completely different from the way you remember it. Or the campground you used to go for church camp is gone, or otherwise changed, or wherever it is that you felt most at home with God is nowhere to be found, or no longer accessible to you, what should you do?

The Psalm we read earlier this morning written by and to people who could probably resonate with that. It was probably written around the same time as our passage from last week, in the moments following the return of Israel from Exile. And it reflects this rollercoaster of emotions they were experiencing.

In the first three verses, they are ecstatic, as they thank God for turning the tables in the favor, for forgiving them of the sins that led to their exile in the first place, and compelling those in positions of authority to allow them to return to their land, and begin the work of rebuilding their homes, and towns and villages, and their Temple.

Then in verses four through seven, the pendulum swings in the other direction, as they acknowledge that things are still very far from perfect. We talked about some of the challenges they were facing last week. Threats from neighboring nations. Corruption among their religious leaders. Even though they had been allowed to return, they were still under the rule of a foreign power. They are crying out to God to finish what he started.

The last few verses contain God's answer to their prayer. There is a day coming, when he will meet them. As they move toward Him, He is moving toward them. When this happens worlds will collide, only not with destructive force, but with something as gentle as a meeting, a warm embrace, a kiss. God's steadfast love and faithfulness, his righteousness and peace, his goodness, will intersect with their faithfulness. They will finally and fully be at home with their Creator.

We could liken this to our own spiritual journeys...

What we want for Christmas, more than anything, is to be at home with God, to sense his presence in a very real and tangible way. Like the people of Israel, he has done great things for us. Really, even greater things. He has come to earth through the person of Jesus. Through Jesus we have found forgiveness for our sins. We have been set free from the things that held us captive. It's an amazing thing...

But our lives are far from perfect. He has not finished what he started, in the world, or in us. There is still plenty of evil in the world. There is still a little bit of selfishness in us. We struggle with temptation. We don't always make the best decisions.

We want God to get things back on track. We want to be at home with God, but how do we get there? I'm not talking about Heaven, when we go there or God comes here, whichever way you choose to look at it. I'm talking about now. Could we be at home with God this Christmas?

We can find God at the points of intersection between heaven and earth. Wherever God's steadfast love, his faithfulness, his righteousness, his peace, his goodness intersects with our world...there God is. We can go to these points of intersection, and we can be at home with God. As we, the forgiven and Holy Spirit-filled followers of Jesus pursue love, and peace, and righteousness and faithfulness, our lives meet with his. Our paths cross, and we are at home with our God.

It's not home in the fullest sense of the word, but it's as close as we can be on this side of eternity. And it's close enough to make this Christmas, and every Christmas, the celebration that it should be.