

“What Breaks Us and What Makes Us”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

May 10, 2020

e-Worship @ 10:30 am

1 Peter 2:2-10

John 14:1-14

Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” Maybe *this* is what Jesus was talking about! I mean, here I am in the sanctuary, with my family by ourselves. You could say that this is God’s house. But you are each in your own homes, watching and worshipping too. So you are also in God’s house. See? In God’s house, there are many dwelling places.

I had never thought about this verse in such a light-- usually I think of it in terms of the afterlife promised to us in Jesus. In fact, last week I was called by the hospice chaplain at Holy Name. She told me there’s a woman who is receiving in-home hospice care, in Fort Lee. She’s nearing her last days, but she can speak enough that she asked for prayer from a pastor. When asked what kind of pastor, she clearly said, “Presbyterian.” So I called her, and offered prayer and scripture with words such as these. I could only hear her breathing, but her aide, Sybil, was her voice, offering, “Amen,” “That’s right,” and “Alleluia.” I think about caregivers such as Sybil as being the hands and touch of God, leading people from one earthly existence into an eternal one. I might have offered the word of God, but it is Sybil who embodies the presence of God.

These times are teaching us more than we have ever imagined about being in a dwelling place. Never in my entire life have I spent so much time at home. By now I know better which floorboards creak. I know where to sit at what time of day if I want the sunlight to spill on me. Twice Chris and I have puzzled over the washing machine when the gentle whir became a shriek, but twice we have gotten it back up and running. Our daughter has put bright rainbows and teddy bears in our windows to show our neighbors “we’re here!” and our community’s medical and essential workers our gratitude and support.

A dwelling place needs tending. Those who live within it need tending too. My dog seems to have the impression that I am staying home so that I can be her personal butler. Servicing her involves letting her inside, letting her outside, letting her inside, letting her outside, over and over through the day. It also involves looking adoringly into

her eyes while she pants in my face, with pleading breath that is stinky beyond words. She thinks servicing her involves giving her a taste of my dinner, but she is wrong; she's forgotten that she can't handle table food like she used to. Still, whenever I do not service her as she thinks I should, she gives me a punishing bark, or attaches herself to me like velcro, panting until I do as she pleases. Lucydog is old, so her demands are understandable. I hope someone will be as patient with me when I grow needy.

Our daughter thinks that we should be servicing her at all times too, but she is young, and so dwelling together means finding the right balance between kind helpfulness and "you need to learn to do this for yourself." She may not learn everything she's meant to learn in the 2nd grade this spring, but she's doing her own laundry now and we have big hopes that she'll emerge from this pandemic able to safely scramble eggs for herself.

We have much more time as individuals to tend to our own spirits, and to tend our relationship with God now. Our dwelling places with God may be cluttered by the sink that somehow always feels full of dishes even though you just did them a couple of hours ago. Our dwelling places with God may be cluttered by our fears, our grief, and our anxiety. But our dwelling places with God are *not* cluttered by our business. Most of us are no longer commuting to work or school. We are no longer going to soccer games, theater, the mall, or t'ai chi at the rec. Clearly, as we can see on our Zoom meetings, we are not getting our hair done. We have a heck of a lot more time to look at ourselves, and to look at God.

"If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." When Jesus said this to the disciples, Philip demanded, "Lord, show us, and we will be satisfied." On days when I search for God and find no evidence for God's presence, it gives me a bit of comfort that Jesus stood, visibly in front of the disciples, carrying the full holiness of God, and the disciples still couldn't see and recognize God. Jesus's answer, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." I understand many of you hear that and it sounds painfully exclusionary-- like, unless you have a personal relationship with Jesus, you will never get to God. Instead, I think of it as Jesus holding the door open for us, for anyone, to get to God-- kind of like the caring touch Sybil has for her patient in hospice care. As Sybil stands in that gateway between life and death, her touch, her company, and the comfort she offers help to ensure that the entry is a peaceful welcome.

This way to find dwelling with God does not just come when we die, either. God nurtures it in us through life, as a mother would. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- if indeed you have tasted that

the Lord is good.” God makes a home for us; as Jesus said, God’s house has *many* dwelling places. We can look beyond our own homes, our own lives, and see God too.

I have been thinking lately of how we see, and we value one another-- especially in these times. This is really what will make or break us, as a community that can survive beyond the pandemic, and what will make or break us as people of God. It troubles me that black people in America die from COVID-19 at twice the rate of white people; the death rate among Latinex people is also much higher than it should be-- clearly, there are systemic inequalities in healthcare access and lifestyle options that have made race and class an indicator of who will live and who will die . It troubles me that nursing homes and prisons are huge vectors for infection, both for people dwelling in them and for workers. If we let nature run its course so that the strongest will survive, we have to understand that who our society has propped up to be “strong” does not recognize the sacred worth of each individual, as Genesis states, “In the image of God they were created, male and female God created them.” In our very creation lies a mandate for how we must treat one another-- as a dwelling place for the image of God.

But there is hope. Some may think this pandemic is going to spin out like *Lord of the Flies*-- that is, the story of a group of shipwrecked boys, who decide their 3 main goals would be to: 1) have fun-- after all, there are no grownups around 2) survive and 3) make smoke signals with the hope of being rescued. Ralph becomes the ringleader. They do have fun; in fact, they have so much fun that no one tends the fire. As they spiral further from their sense of connection to civilization, their relationship deteriorates. They start fighting over leadership, biting and kicking. By the time they are finally rescued, three children have died and those who have survived have lost all the innocence of childhood.

That was a fictional story, written in 1954 by William Golding. Many have seen it as a cynical allegory of how evil our unchecked human impulses are. But the dwelling place of the author was pretty chaotic: turns out, he had been an unhappy individual: “an alcoholic, prone to depression; a man who beat his kids. ‘I have always understood the Nazis,’ Golding confessed, ‘because I am of that sort by nature.’” And it was ‘partly out of that sad self-knowledge’ that he wrote *Lord of the Flies*.¹

About 15 years after *Lord of the Flies* was published, there lived a group of 6 boys in Tonga. Bored with school life, they decided to “borrow” a neighbor’s fishing boat to find some adventure. But they got caught in a storm, and found themselves stranded on a

¹ Rutger Bregman, “The real Lord of the Flies: what happened when 6 boys were shipwrecked for 15 months” in *The Guardian*, May 9, 2020

deserted island which would become their dwelling place for 15 months, through which all survived; they figured out how to collect water, grow vegetables, raise wild chickens, and even set a boy's leg after he fell off a cliff and broke it. They made a strict schedule for chores, and set a goal to not quarrel-- though when arguments did break out, they solved them peacefully. They began and ended each day with song and prayer.

The lectionary text I did not choose for today was from Acts, and it told of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr after Jesus. Surely we have teetered from that place of confidence that we can dwell together, emerging with our lives, and our fear that we won't get out of this unless someone gets stoned. But our epistle lesson calls us to *become* stones ourselves-- not stones thrown for harm, but living stones that can be built into a spiritual house, with Christ as the cornerstone. When this dwelling has been made, then we who were *not* a people will be called *God's people*; we who had *not* received mercy will receive *God's* mercy.

These times will test us. We will discover more of what our dwelling places are made of. But rather than finding our security in hoarding the best bricks and building materials for ourselves, we know our dwelling place will be stronger, and we will be more likely to find God in it, if we see that our neighbors have what they need to live. Consider yourself as a living stone that can help make such a dwelling place possible. Amen.