

“Welcome Home”

Psalm 90.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 23 October 2008

Thanks for doing what faithful people have done for thousands of years: *singing a psalm!* One of the aspects of singing I like best is that it makes the psalm easy to remember. I'll bet that some of you will be able to hum or sing, “Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to another,” for some time to come, which is great, because Psalm 90 (at least part of it) is now in your faith tool kit. For those with a stronger sense of linguistic, rather than musical, intelligence, let me read the first six verses of the psalm:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn us back to dust,
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

You may not realize that you know this psalm; if you were here two weeks ago, we sung the famous Isaac Watts paraphrase: “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” (Footnote: Watts was a Congregational minister in London.)

A refuge. A dwelling place. A home. Those aspects of the central image of God in this psalm hit us on a very basic human level, namely our need for shelter. I don't know if there are any Mick Jagger fans among us, but if so, you probably remember the Rolling Stones song, “Gimme Shelter,” which says, “A storm is threatening my very life today, if I don't get some shelter, I'm gonna fade away.”

And there are moments in each of our lives when something horrific happens and we feel as though we are going to fade into nothingness because of some tragedy in our lives. When we experience grief and loss, it's helpful to have the refuge, the shelter, of God, who invites us in from the cold. That is the reason I so often use “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” as a hymn at funerals and memorial services. There are times when we need shelter.

I want to shift a bit from that idea and look at the concept of **home**. At its most basic level, a home is a dwelling place or a structure that provides shelter, but a home is something much more. People in marketing in the real estate and construction industries understand this, which is why they call houses “homes” and why they call construction “home-building.” There is something profoundly comforting about *home*.

In Ireland, the old concept was that everything revolved around the peat fire in the hearth – it as the source of warmth and light; it was the center of family life and represented the center of the home. And for some families, the center of the home is the kitchen table. If you saw the film *Moonstruck*, the kitchen was the focal point of family life.

So, what are the characteristics of *home* for you? Is it having family or pets around? Is it a sense of comfort and security? Is it knowing that this is *your* place? Is it just familiar?

I'd like to ask you to do a little imagining with me in a guided meditation. (You're welcome to relax and close your eyes if you wish. If memories of home are problematic for you, don't feel that you have to do this.) Imagine your home. Imagine a safe place where you are absolutely secure. Imagine that you are enfolded in love. You are bathed in warmth and light.

It could be in your childhood home, or your home right now, maybe it's your favorite chair, wrapped in a blanket, or perhaps it's not even within a house.

What is it like, this home of yours? Do you feel nourished here? Do you feel connected in this place? Is this where your batteries get recharged? Is it your refuge?

And think of the presence of God in this home of yours. How does God appear to you? Do you see God or is there an invisible presence you can sense? Know that this presence is available to you anytime you wish to have it. That this is a place and a presence you can revisit whenever you need to. And as you are ready, imagine yourself saying a temporary good-bye to this place, knowing that you can always return, and the presence will be with you in all places. And as you leave that home, I invite you to sense that you are present in this place...here, now, in the presence of God. And when you are ready, feel your feet on the floor and open your eyes.



Home is a powerful idea for us. Even in a society as transient as ours, the idea of having a home has deep roots within us. I noticed while driving to DIA that the new city of Reunion tries to attract residents by calling itself "your new hometown," which is something of an oxymoron.

Perhaps, like a lot of Americans, you "left home" as an 18-year-old and moved on to create your own home. Maybe for Americans, that's a normal part of the developmental process: rejecting home and moving on to a place or a situation in which you can create something new and different.

Think about the parallels in terms of spirituality...how many of us leave the religious tradition of our youth, perhaps reject it, and seek something new? Maybe we wind up trying something vastly different, jumping from Judaism to Tibetan Buddhism or from Lutheranism to evangelical Christianity. For some of us, it may not have been a huge leap from, say, Presbyterianism to the United Church, and for others, you may have come from a family with no religious background at all, and once you found what Kierkegaard called the "God-shaped hole" in yourself, you found yourself here. And some of us make our way back to the religious tradition of our youth. Yet lots of people remain spiritually homeless, unable to find a home that feels warm, safe, enriching, authentic, and congruent with the ways we think about home.



I grew up in a very mobile American family, moving a lot, attending 10 different schools between kindergarten and high school graduation. And even though we lived in four different places in southern Connecticut at different times, one of the constants in our family life was Second Congregational UCC in Greenwich.

It was there that I felt at home. I remember being in the children's choir and climbing through huge organ pipes that hadn't been installed yet, and learning to read music by turning pages sitting on the organ bench next to Lowell Lacey our music director. My two Sunday School teachers, Phyllis Jacob and John Phillips, are still members of that church, and I remember John (who was president of Columbia Records) bringing Dunkin' donuts and big stacks of demo LPs to our jr. high Sunday School class. And I remember confirmation class with Jim Bracher.

As a kid, my home was not a house, it was a church. I know not everyone finds a home in a church. But, my fervent desire is that Plymouth can be a warm, inviting shelter for those who are searching. Searching for a home ...

- where we can bring our brain to church on Sunday
- where there is true intergenerational community
- where people are welcome without regard to their race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or identity, or socio-economic status
- where we find meaning and a sense of belonging as we serve others and are served when we are in need
- where we are challenged to think and feel outside the confines of boxes created by our culture
- where we uncover new perspectives on our faith and new ways of translating faith into action

As we welcome new members today, I hope that all of us can find a way of saying, “Welcome home” to each of them.



It is not simply that this place and these people are our home – and it is my hope that you have or will develop that sense – but that we represent Christ to one another in good times and in bad. And that we are a glimpse, even a tiny hint, or being a refuge, a dwelling a home that we might find together in God.

You probably remember *The Wizard of Oz*, which in many ways is an icon of American mythology. Dorothy, an orphan, goes to live with aunt and uncle, but then is transported to a distant land filled with strange and amazing creatures. And the longing deep within her is to return to the place that she had come to, and I’m sure you remember Judy Garland clicking the ruby slippers and saying, “There’s no place like home, there’s no place like home,” until she finally found herself back in Kansas with Auntie Em and Uncle Henry...the place and the people she call home. You can find home, whether you were born in the UCC tradition or no religious tradition at all.

My hope is that when you enter the doors of this church you have the sense that you are greeted with open arms and that we all have a sense of God saying, “Welcome home!” Amen.