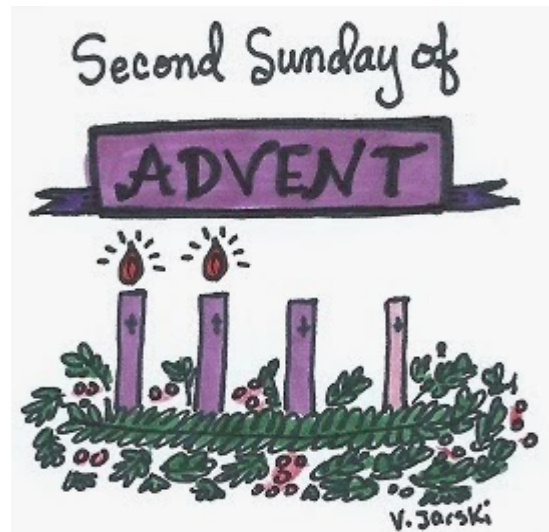


Home for the Holidays
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534
December 7, 2014
2nd Sunday of Advent
Lectionary Passages:
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8



1. Last week we hosted several homeless families in our church through the Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network (RAIHN).
 - a. This Tuesday – in a single day – in the fourth Annual ROC the Day expression of #Giving Tuesday our community raised \$844,272.¹
 - i. This is a generous 8.2% increase over giving from last year.
 - b. These funds will be used by hundreds of not-for-profit agencies in the area to improve the homes and lives of countless individuals in our area.
 - c. On this Second Sunday of Advent, our scriptures point to the potent idea of home.²
 - d. The idea of home, and homecoming, is at the heart of great literature - like Homer's *Odyssey* - and great music, from Dvorak's magnificent Ninth Symphony, *From the New World*, with its haunting Largo we know as "Going Home," to spirituals first sung by slaves violently wrenched from their homes —"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin' for to Carry Me Home"—and, of course, popular songs such as "I'll Be Home for Christmas," written in 1943 when millions of young Americans were far from home, scattered all over a world at war.
 - i. I'll be home for Christmas You can count on me. . . . Christmas Eve will find me Where the love light gleams. I'll be home for Christmas If only in my dreams.
 - e. Episcopal priest and popular author Barbara Brown Taylor says,

¹ www.roctheday.org accessed 12/4/14.

² John Buchanan. "The Comfort and Joy of Home" December 2, 2008.

- i. My house is much more than my residence.
 - ii. It is my sanctuary, the place where I rest; where I retire beyond the reach of the noisy world, where I am fed.
 - iii. It is where my bed is and my books and my Great Aunt Alma's quilts.
 - iv. My house is a promise I make to myself when I get too tired to go on—"you can go home now."³
- f. Frederick Buechner, who thinks and writes a lot about home, says that home is the place "where you feel, or did once feel, uniquely at home, which is to say a place where you belong, where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment"⁴
- g. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Advent 1943 to his parents and friends from his Nazi prison cell, where he was imprisoned until his execution just five days before the end of World War II.
 - i. He writes a lot about home.
 - ii. To a friend in the German army: "How marvelous that you are home for Advent! I can imagine your singing hymns together" (p. 101).
 - iii. A few days later, he wrote, "I wonder where we shall both be for Christmas?" (p. 103)
 - iv. And finally, near Christmas, "There have been a few occasions in my life when I have had to learn what homesickness means. There is no agony worse than this. During the months in prison I have sometimes been terribly homesick" (p. 112).
- h. There is, quite simply, no more emotionally evocative, powerful, or important idea than home, and we will all, in some way, go—as we carefully rehearse customs precious in our families, as we bake the cookies, decorate the tree, lovingly place the last remaining ornament from the first ones we purchased decades ago—we will all go home, if, as the song says, only in our dreams.
- 2. Six centuries before the birth of Jesus, God's people were dreaming of home.
 - a. The Babylonians had defeated their nation; devastated their holy city,

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life*, p. 156.

⁴ Frederick Buechner. *The Longing for Home*, Preface.

- Jerusalem; leveled God's temple; and driven the people across the desert to live in Babylonian captivity as exiles.
- b. In Babylon, God's people longed to go home; they remembered how it used to be at home in Jerusalem.
 - c. They sang the old songs.
 - d. They told the old stories to their children every evening.
 - e. One of their psalmists wrote this haunting lament:
 - i. By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. . . . If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 137)
 - f. Home is the theme of the great Advent hymn:
 - i. O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.
 - g. And then a letter arrived in the exile community, written by one of their greatest poets, a prophet who somehow remained back in burned-out Jerusalem.
 - h. The letter he wrote begins at the fortieth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah with words made familiar not only because we read them every Advent, but because George Frederic Handel chose them to introduce his oratorio Messiah:
 - i. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.
 - i. The prophet paints a vivid picture: a highway will be built across the desert, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough places will be smooth—and over that highway, a procession will move.
 - i. Banners and trumpets will announce the coming of the king, returning to Jerusalem.
 - ii. "Get you to the high mountain," the herald commands.
 - iii. "Lift up your voice; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'"
 1. The exiles are going home again.
 - j. The effect of that letter when it arrived in the exile community must have been electric.

- k. Men stood tall again, mothers told their children the stories that night with a promise:
 - l. “We’re going home soon. Here is our God!”
- m. Grandmothers began to gather up the family belongings: “We’re going home!”
- 3. But wait, the prophet says.
 - a. Wait a minute.
 - b. This picture is not quite right: Isaiah is not painting a picture of the royal potentate riding on his war horse, preceded by banners and trumpets, victoriously proceeding across the desert toward home.
 - c. What comes next is one of the most dramatic and radical moves in all of literature.
 - i. Isaiah says, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them on his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”
 - d. If that’s God, it is a very different notion of who God is.
 - i. The royal potentate, powerful king riding a war-horse in proud procession, trumpet blaring, banners unfurled—that’s many people’s favorite image of God.
 - ii. But a shepherd, tenderly speaking, carrying lambs in his arm, gently leading—that is a very different, very radical theology.
 - e. The God of the most popular religiosity recently - the vengeful, wrathful violent God of the Left Behind series of apocalyptic best sellers about the end time and the second coming of Christ - is terrifying.
 - i. This God’s coming, this second coming, will be bloody, powerful, and violent.
 - 1. This is not the God about whom the prophet Isaiah is writing.
 - ii. “Can it be, in contrast to what so many want to believe,” Kathleen Norris asks, “that mercy is really at the heart of God?”⁵
 - f. A God who says, “Comfort, comfort my people,” a shepherd who tenderly speaks and carries the lambs in his arm and gently leads his flock home—that is a radical theology, a radical notion of how God acts, a radical notion of what it means to love and follow Jesus Christ as Lord

⁵ Kathleen Norris. “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, December 13, 2005.

and Savior.

- g. “Comfort, O comfort, says your God,” the prophet wrote.
 - i. Comfort: you’re going home now.
 - ii. It is impossible to hear these beautiful Advent words without thinking about those who have no home and the moral implications for those of us who do.
 - iii. In 2013, the Monroe County Department of Human Services (MCDHS) made 8,857 emergency housing placements for individuals and families.
 - 1. This represents a 6% increase from the 8,348 emergency housing placements made in 2012.⁶
 - a. These placements were for both individuals and entire families so that means that at any given time almost 2% of our entire county’s population is homeless.⁷
 - 2. The total cost to taxpayers at \$554/placement was almost \$5 million.
- h. Rochester is declared one of the most livable cities in the nation, but we are also, sadly one of the poorest.
 - i. In major urban centers, we are second only to Detroit, which as you know, went into bankruptcy in 2013.
 - ii. Rochester has the 3rd highest concentration of poverty among the 100 largest metros in America.
 - iii. Across our entire region, more than one in every eight people lives below the federal poverty line.⁸
 - 1. Being homeless is a reality to many of our brothers and sisters right here in Rochester.
- 4. For those of us who have never known what homelessness feels like, it can be hard to empathize with either the harsh reality of these Rochester statistics or the hopeful anticipation of returning from exile announced by Isaiah.
 - a. While we may not understand from our own personal experience the low of homelessness or the high of returning home from exile, we are still

⁶ <http://www2.monroecounty.gov/hs-index.php> Accessed 12/3/14.

⁷ United States Census Bureau puts the 2013 population for Monroe County at 749,606.

⁸ <http://www.racf.org/CommunityImpact/CommunityImpact/tabid/164/smId/605/ArticleID/101/reftab/36/Default.aspx> Rochester Area Community Foundation Poverty Report Accessed 12/2/14

deeply touched by the comfort and security of home.

- b. A growing percentage of us will even seek to challenge that comfort by our entertainment choices.
 - i. Have you noticed the profusion of post-apocalyptic story lines recently?
 - 1. From the 2013 TV series *How to Survive the End of the World* to literally dozens of feature films where the protagonists struggle against natural disasters, alien or zombie invasions, or super-natural beings, we increasingly seek to be entertained by our heroes surviving against all odds to return home so we can hope that we would survive in similarly outlandish circumstances.⁹
 - a. Even in ridiculously terrifying circumstances, we need to know that we will be able to regain the comfort of home again.
 - b. Each year as we come through Advent, we replay for ourselves that assurance of being able to comfort ourselves with the promise of home.
 - c. Isn't it ironic that during Advent, as we anticipate celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, we are facing our deepest fears of our own mortality?
 - i. Listen again to today's scriptures – they speak of mortality.
 - 1. Isaiah says, 'the grass withers, the flower fades.'
 - 2. Peter writes, 'we wait for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.'
 - 3. The psalmist proclaims, 'Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him.'
- c. Yes, Advent reminds us that we are all eventually going home to be with God.
 - i. But before we do go home, we can make this world a better place

⁹ <http://prepforshft.com/best-survival-movies/#.VIKKiosQZBI> Accessed 12/6/14 includes films like "The Book of Eli", "The Road Warrior", "Red Dawn", "World War Z", "Noah" and 53 others.

for those who know no home now or for those whose homes are destroyed by poverty, racism, or injustice.

1. It's what we do regularly with RAIHN or JASY or countless other mission projects here.
 2. It's what we do whenever we share the Good News in thought, word, or deed.
 3. And when we help others feel at home, we too are more thankful for our own homes.
- ii. The good news of Advent comes in ancient words:
 1. Comfort, comfort my people—
 - a. We are going home.
 - iii. A shepherd will lead us home and carry the lambs, carry any who, for whatever reason, can't make it on their own.
 - iv. One is coming who speaks tenderly and gathers up all who stumble and fall, all who are sick, all who labor and are heavily burdened, all who are weary, sad, all this morning who are ill and frightened, all whose illness is critical and final, all who are anxious and worried, all who are discouraged and depressed, all who are alone and lonely and homesick.
 - v. One is coming who gathers them all up and gently leads them—all of them, all of us—home.
- d. Mary and Joseph were homeless, after all.
 - i. They left their home in Nazareth to travel all the way to Bethlehem and after that to Egypt.
 - ii. In Bethlehem, they made a home for their child as best they could.
 - iii. They wrapped him in bands of swaddling cloths to keep him warm and secure.
 - iv. They laid him in a manger and watched over him and kept him safe.
 - e. And, somehow, beneath it all, you and I know, that there, in Bethlehem, in the night, as he is born, we are all, finally, home.