

“Comfort Found at Home”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Part II of VI in “Home for Christmas” Sermon Series

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 6, 2020, dedicated to Maya, Alyssia, and Heather who were headliners in the Columbus Dispatch on December 5, 2020, to Mark Williams and all the teens and adults who had the vision to place white flags on our west lawn to remember those who have died from COVID-19, to all the frontline workers in America and around the world fighting for us against COVID-19 & always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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If I had stood in this pulpit just one year ago today, on the Second Sunday of Advent in 2019 and told you that I had had a vision of more than 14.7 million Americans virally infected and more than 281,000 Americans dead from a virus called “COVID-19,” of businesses and corporations all working from home, of food being regularly delivered to your doorstep, of restaurants closed, of schools, universities, churches and public meetings and rallies being “done” on “ZOOM” and “livestreaming,” of economic shut-downs and

hardships, of seven hour curfews every night, of a reckoning of racial justice coming to our land, of Thanksgiving with no one at the table – except a computer screen showing 30 people at the table somewhere else in the world, of Advent and Christmas coming with no one in the church building, you would have asked for me to see a psychiatrist and seek medication and help. Or perhaps you would have simply asked me to take my “vision” somewhere else.

If my reply had been, *“No, I’m not leaving until the alien monoliths in Utah, California and Romania are removed,”* you definitely would have escorted me from the building.

What seemed absolutely impossible and incredible 52 weeks ago has become our reality.

“Home” has taken on a whole new meaning.

Home is where we reside but it has become where many of us work, go to school, go to church, and cook and eat most every meal.

“These four walls” have taken on much more meaning in 2020.

Instead of the place of refuge and safe return, our four walls have become our entire universe. But unlike the homes we have come to know and love through the generations, our homes have become bunkers against a tiny unseen enemy – a virus which strikes quick and hard. Many of us have not had guests, friends or family in our homes for over nine months. And the ones who have entered have had to pass all sorts of tests and stayed masked and gloved and more. “Home” has become a nest and fort; a place of respite and protection; a place of comfort and a desert – of sorts.

Our homes have become our “poustinia.”

In his book, *“The Desert in the City,”* Brother Carlos Carretto, the desert monk from a north African hermitage who moved to the metropolis of Rome introduces us to “Poustinia” - the Russian word for “desert.” While poustinia may mean a geographical place, it is also a hermitage, a quiet place set apart. “Poustinia” can be a place where people go, withdraw in silence and discover God. As one Russian mystic has written: *“Poustinia is the place where we raise the arms of prayer and penance toward God. Poustinia is the place where we gather courage, where we pronounce words of truth remembering that God is truth. It is the place where we purify ourselves and prepare ourselves to act as if touched by the burning coal that was placed by the angel on the lips of the Prophet.”* (Catherine Doherty, *Poustinia*, Cerf, Paris & Fount paperbacks, London, 1977).

This Advent we are called to discover **poustinia** in our homes.

We are called home to “poustinia” to gather courage and pronounce the truth, remembering that God is truth. In the desert in the city, in the desert of our homes, we will discover the truth of this season in unlikely places and from unsuspecting people.

Just ask Bill Goettler. Rev. Bill Goettler is a Presbyterian pastor and assistant dean of ministerial studies at Yale Divinity School. Bill discovered “truth” on Church Street in New Haven, Connecticut, in the person of Danny, a homeless neighbor of his.

Bill tells the story of Danny who (first) appeared on his front porch on a cold December afternoon a number of years ago, hat in hand. He was honest, at least. He had been sleeping here and there since getting back into town, he said, mostly on the porch of the Red Cross headquarters across from the church. The people there didn’t seem to mind and he always cleared out before anyone arrived for work

in the morning. He didn't want anyone to be frightened. He needed some food, maybe some money for the bus.

Bill had just hung the Moravian Christmas star on his front porch and had placed Advent candles in his windows. It was a pretty tough moment to refuse someone aid, so against his better judgment he dug into his wallet and found a few dollars to help Danny.

As he was leaving, Danny turned and looked Bill in the eye. *“Is this the way it's supposed to be?”* he asked. He was off before Bill could reply or even register what he'd said. He came back with one need or another throughout that winter and across the years that followed.

Through housing placements and jobs that never seemed to work for long, Bill kept track of Danny, or was it more like Danny was keeping track of Bill? Their conversations would always open with, *“Good morning, Reverend,”* and then shortly after, Danny would deliver his one-line sermon, *“Reverend, is this the way it's supposed to be?”*

It reached the point where Bill did everything he could to avoid Danny. Slowing his steps when he saw him, crossing the street to avoid him, admitting that he did not like the relationship they had at all. He did not want to hear THAT question. He did not want to hear the one-line sermon all over again, *“Reverend, is this the way it's supposed to be?”* (“Living the Word,” *The Christian Century*, Nov. 29, 2011, Bill Goettler, p. 20).

On the surface, this question seems innocuous. As you dig deeper it is disarming. As you go even deeper, it becomes haunting. Is God's creation supposed to be this disharmonious? Is society supposed to be taking care of its members on the margins? Is it supposed to be that some people have to beg for a living, while others...

are paid for their work and have a place called home? (Ibid, p. 20). Are we supposed to be arguing that Black Lives Really Matter? Are we supposed to be divided as a nation over our most fundamental understandings of how our democracy works?

Are we all supposed to be in our homes isolated like desert flowers blooming in sand blown earth during the season of Advent and Christmas? Is this what poustinia looks like and feels like?

How long, O Lord, how long will we be on stay-at home orders?

John the Baptist didn't believe things were supposed to be the way they were. John, the odd and challenging cousin of Jesus and the first prophet of our Christian tradition, appears in the wilderness with a two-line sermon not unlike Danny's one-liner. Drawing on Isaiah's 500-year-old prophetic words, John proclaims, *"Prepare the way of the Lord. Make God's path straight!"*

People must look at him as if he is crazy, but they are also drawn to him. They offer him bread to go with his wild honey. They give him a bus ticket hoping he will land a real job. Like us, they would prefer to hear about the wonderful baby Jesus. People would say, *"Hey John, tell us about your cousin and his mom and dad on their journey to Bethlehem. Tell us about the messiah born in a stable full of animals - you know the one we love to put in our Christmas cards."*

John responds, *"You are not ready for that story. You need to Remember Isaiah! DO you even know his words? Do you remember his words? Every valley will be lifted-up and every hill will be knocked down. Equity for the meek, justice for the poor that is how our Lord is coming! Pay attention!"*

The poustinia out of which John comes and from which he speaks, is a desert that is courageous and speaks truth we are hesitant to

hear. We want Christmas without the prophets. We want the birth narrative without the desert storm. We want redemption without judgment. We want equity without giving anything up. We want peace without struggle.

In addition, we want all of the Dannys and all of Danny's echoing words on Church Street – *“Is this the way it's supposed to be?”* – to go away and leave us alone. In the popular culture of which we are all apart, Christmas arrives just following Halloween and it comes to full revelation a few hours after we finished doing the dishes on Thanksgiving. It comes with a plastic baby Jesus in a manger, with songs of angels over our heads in malls and stores (now it comes with our computers singing to us about cyberspace purchasing). It comes from the God of consumerism.

But you know what - we answer to a different God. Our God comes where our God comes! Our God comes from the desert. For us, our God comes from the poustinia of the city. From the desert of our homes, God is proclaiming, *“Comfort, O Comfort, my people.”* God is calling us to establish our homes this Advent as places of comfort where we can prepare a place for the coming of Christ. So, before God arrives, get ready.

This Advent - Allow God in to make the rough places in your life plain again. Allow God in to make the anxiety of your life a place of peace. Allow God in to make the distress of your life a place of rest. Allow God in to care for the poverty in and around you. Allow God to establish poustinia in your home and heart.

Only then, will God's peace and God's justice fill the earth. When we allow God in, we can turn Danny's haunting question into a statement of faith: **This is the way it is supposed to be.** Amen.

