“No Place Like Home”
II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-45

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From the Pulpit
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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 4, December 21, 2014, dedicated to the men and women of our Armed Services returning home from Afghanistan, to all those soldiers who died in Afghanistan, to all who are coming or going home for the holidays, to our staff at First Church and always to the glory of God!

“*No Place Like Home*”

*II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-45*

We have been visited by no less than three baptismal angels this Advent – Zaria, Nolan and Atticus! Today our fourth angel – The Angel Gabriel comes in full splendor and introduces us to a new prophet. Her name is Mary. Prophets, we discover, are not welcome in their home town. So, this prophet travels to her cousin’s place before eventually returning home.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our salvation. Amen.
Home is where the heart is, we are told. Home is the place where we are supposed to experience many things - including happiness, safety and love. And (of course) “there is no place like...home.”

Today our texts take us in search of home.

Of course, one of the most famous stories of the search for home was delivered by 75 years ago on the magic screen by Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) in the 1939 film, “The Wizard of Oz.”

Dorothy Gale is a Kansas farm girl. Dorothy lives with her dog Toto on the farm of her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. Dorothy and Toto get in trouble with a cruel neighbor, Miss Almira Gulch, when Toto bites her.

Terrified by Miss Gulch, Dorothy rides home but no one is paying attention to her as she tells her story and then Miss Gulch arrives with permission from the sheriff to have Toto be euthanized. He is taken away, but escapes and returns home to Dorothy. She then decides to run away from home with Toto to escape Miss Gulch.

They meet Professor Marvel, a phony fortune teller, who realizes Dorothy has run away and tricks her via his crystal ball into believing that her aunt is ill so that she may return home. Miss Gale races home as a powerful tornado develops. Unable to get into the storm cellar, she seeks safety in her house – more specifically- in her bedroom. A
wind-blown window sash hits her head and she falls unconscious on her bed. She wakes to find her Kansas house spinning in the air, held aloft by the twister. In the storm outside the window she sees an elderly lady in a chair, several farm animals, two men rowing a boat, as well as Miss Gulch pedaling her bicycle, who transforms into a cackling witch flying on a broomstick.

Dorothy’s home crash lands in Munchkinland, in the world of Oz, where the film changes to Technicolor. Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, and the Munchkins, welcome her as a heroine because the house has landed on and killed the Wicked Witch of the East, leaving only her feet exposed. Her sister, the Wicked Witch of the West, arrives to claim the magic ruby slippers worn on her sister's feet. Glinda transfers them off her feet to Dorothy's feet instead. The Witch of the West swears revenge on Dorothy and Toto for her sister's death. Glinda tells Dorothy to follow the yellow brick road to the Emerald City, where the Wizard of Oz might be able to help her get back home. So off she goes – down the yellow brick road.

Young Dorothy spends the rest of the story following the Yellow Brick Road - at the end of which there is a promise of return to home. As she meanders (home) down the twisting Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy befriends: a Scarecrow, in need of a brain; a Tin Man in need of a heart,
and a Cowardly Lion, obviously in need of “courage” – all the while fending off the Witched Witch of the West’s attempts to steal those ruby shoes.

I won’t tell you how the movie ends… but there are winged-monkeys, a broom, a balloon, and a kitten that messes with Toto… and of course those ruby slippers – see it yourself while your home for the holidays!

But, I will tell you, Dorothy finds her way home only after coming to the realization that “There is No place like home.”

Home is where the heart, the mind, and courage find themselves surrounding us and caring for us. Today, God finds Godself in search of home – in the Old and the New Testaments.

In II Samuel, God establishes the house of David - a dynasty which will rule Israel and Judah for generations to come. It all begins when David is trying to build a shrine or “House” for God - a holy temple for the Lord God Almighty. David is concerned that the presence of the Lord has been carried around in a tent from place to place. David feels it time for a temple to replace a tent. In David’s desire to honor and serve God by building a glorious structure, everything eventually gets inverted. Why? Because, although God likes the idea of establishing a home, God is more
interested in establishing God’s eternal presence in David’s household. God says through the prophet Nathan, “I am building my ‘house’ on your foundation, David.” You and your family will rule from this time forward. You shall be the ‘House of David’ - my earthly kingdom shall be in your hands.”

You all know, of course, that it is from this “House of David” that our Savior comes. Remember, Joseph, Mary and eventually Jesus has all gone to Bethlehem because Joseph is from “the house and lineage of David.” They have gone to register with others in their extended family - in the “City of David” – which is the hometown of the great King.

In Luke 1, the 14-year-old poor maiden named Mary is at home in Nazareth, minding her own business when an Angel of the Lord pops in. Gabriel lands from his heavenly home to tell Mary that God is “making his home” in you. In other words, God is “pitching His Tent” with you (the actual translation of John 1:14). Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, (the same Spirit which rested over the tent of Moses in Exodus 40:34), Mary becomes the Dwelling Place for all generations. The house of David is reestablished in the “Incarnate Word Made Flesh” dwelling among us full of power and glory – Jesus of Nazareth.
In our Gospel text, Luke 1:26-45, Mary becomes our final prophet of Advent. While we will come to know her as the Mother of Jesus, Mary is chosen by God to bear a message even before she bears a child. Like Abraham before her, Mary accepts the gift of life that God has promised her and God’s calling to be the one who gives life to God’s Son. It is literally not safe for her to be pregnant and unmarried in Nazareth. So, Mary sets off from home to travel to see Elizabeth and share their pregnancies together in a little town called Ein Karem (which means “Spring of the Vineyard”).

Nestled in the jagged hills southwest of Jerusalem, Ein Karem is a peaceful village - a great place to call home and raise a child. Here is where John the Baptist was born and raised. Here with Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary finds a safe haven in which to go through her pregnancy and share the miracle of life growing inside her with her much older cousin. It is here that Mary sings her song of praise to God, “My soul magnifies the Lord…” Here in the protective shelter of God’s healing love, Mary finds home.

This is a season in search of home.

In film and in theatres, all the stories of this season are centered in home and homecoming. Exodus, Interstellar, the Hobbit and of course Annie are all centered in finding
home. The Nutcracker is staged in a home celebrating Christmas and even though the choreography takes us far into imagination land, we return home in the end.

Meanwhile across Capitol Square, A Christmas Carol is all about homecoming. Ebenezer Scrooge spends most of his travels through the visions of Ghosts past, present, and future in homes. Jacob Marley’s spirit visits Scrooge’s home, he visits Bob Cratchit’s home (twice), he is abandoned as a young child and not welcomed home for Christmas, Mr. Fezziwig’s home hosts a grand Christmas party, the poor house is no home at all – but it becomes home to those whom Scrooge has abandoned - and the home of his nephew Fred is the place where he will eventually make his way for Christmas. In the end, a converted Ebenezer Scrooge comes home…

This month, we have once again declared that our troops are coming home – this time from the longest war in our history – the 13 year war in Afghanistan. This happens at the same time we sending troops from home BACK to Iraq to fight ISIS close to the third anniversary of bringing them all home from Iraq for the second time in some of our lifetimes. We feel in our collective national “gut” that the war on terror is far from over. As our sons and daughters come and go from home to war, we pray for their safety and security as well as our own.
For those returning home, we need to welcome them back among us. It is not easy to return from a desert where the sun beats down with no shade, no respite, and no cooling breeze. Similarly, it is not easy to return from a terrain in high mountains that look like the dark side of the moon. Add to that the pain of returning from war itself, it is especially challenging. While there may be no place like home, each returning soldier has spent time far from home in a place that is unlike anything they knew at home. So, inevitably, home itself will not be the same anymore. Let us love them with all that is within us to love.

As we go and receive our families “home for the holidays” we know these times can be filled with memories, hopes, and expectations – some of which are beautiful and some not real. We want the perfect “holiday homecomings” and for many it feels that way. But those who have experienced the sad effects of alcoholism, neglect or abuse find it hard to be home for the holidays. Others who have lost loved ones in this season or go through the season without someone in their arms they always loved and cherished – and they feel the sting of their absence.

Let’s be honest, the complexities of homecoming can be hard for many people for many reasons. Those who can articulate the reasons share them with me or others. Through the years, I have been impressed by the many ways
people build in healthy and helpful coping mechanisms to help themselves and their children. But some folks simply bury their feelings and memories. Then those feelings and memories find their way out in ways and means that are unrecognizable to the people themselves, but affect those around them.

Whether soldiers coming from far desert or mountain lands or loved ones coming home across emotional miles as they struggle with places in the heart and mind causing them pain, I pray that we may find courage in our wandering home to God and family this Christmas.

As God pitched God’s tent of meaning with the Hebrew people and later with Mary of Nazareth, I pray that we will pitch our tents with God! Because, when we find our Home in God - wherever and whenever that may be - we find true peace. Our journey may be a meandering one. Our journey may be one which causes us to wonder as we wander. But, when we finally find our peace and our home - we will discover the beauty and the mystery of God in our lives, in our families, in our church, in our faith. And when we discover God’s beauty and mystery, we will discover that there really is no place like home. Amen.

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