

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 4, December 18, 2011, dedicated to the Dominican Sisters of Peace who welcomed the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine de' Ricci into their order just like Elizabeth welcomed Mary into her home, to all the soldiers returning home from Iraq, and always to the glory of God!

“Wandering Home”

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

Do you remember we started Advent four weeks ago with a beautiful angel named - *Gabrielle Elizabeth Collins*. That Sunday, we baptized our angel. Today, her counterpart, the Angel Gabriel, returns 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 wandering home.

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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 God, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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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.”

One of the most famous phrases about home is delivered by Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) in the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy Gale is a Kansas farm girl. A tornado sweeps Dorothy away from Kansas along with her dog Toto while they

hide for protection in the bedroom of her home. Her home drops onto the Wicked Witch of the East right in the center of Munchkin Land - the home of all the little Munchkins. Granted the ruby slippers for her part in destroying the wicked witch, young Dorothy spends the rest of the story following a Yellow Brick Road, at the end of which there is a promise of return to home. As she meanders home down the Yellow Brick Road, Dorothy befriends a Scarecrow, a Tin Man and a Cowardly Lion - all the while fending off the Wicked Witch of the West's attempts to steal the ruby shoes. In search of the Wizard of Oz, by movie's end, Dorothy finds her way home only after coming to the realization that, "There is no place like home."

Both Samuel and Luke speak of home today.

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 "house" for God - a holy temple for the God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 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 the tent.

But in David's desire to honor and serve God by building a glorious structure, everything gets inverted. God says, *"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."* It is from this "house of David" that our Savior comes. Remember, Joseph and Mary are headed to Bethlehem because Joseph is from "the house and lineage of David." They have gone to register with others in their family - in the "City of David" - which simply means the hometown of the great king.

In Luke 1:26-45, a 14-year-old poor maiden named Mary is at home in Nazareth, minding her own business, probably cleaning her room when an angel of the Lord drops in.

Gabriel lands from his heavenly home to tell Mary that God is “making his dwelling place” 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 that 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 – her son, our Savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

Mary becomes our final prophet of Advent. While John the Baptist has dominated much of our time and attention, we are now introduced to Mary. We will come to know her as the mother of Jesus, but first Mary is chosen by God to bear a message even before she bears God’s special child. Like Abraham before her, Mary accepts the gift of life that God has promised to her and God’s calling to be the one who gives life to God’s son. She 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.

This is town 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. Home will prove to be elusive for Mary in the time ahead. With Jesus born in a barn and Herod pursuing him as they flee to Egypt, the Holy Family will be refugees – moving from place to place throughout Jesus’ early life. Home is elusive for Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

Home and homecoming has been on all our hearts and minds this week. It has been a week filled with emotions and memories - a week in which our troops from Iraq are finally

coming home.

On Thursday, in a quiet ceremony not attended by Iraqi political leaders, our nine-year war was declared over. Just a few hours ago, the last of our troops rolled over the border from Iraq back into Kuwait. It's a border we have crossed not once, not twice – but four times in the past 20 years.

While the war in Afghanistan continues, the war in Iraq is over. The men and women of our armed services are coming home for Christmas, for Hanukkah, hopefully forever. Nine years have taken a great toll - 4,486 Americans dead and 32,226 seriously wounded. The seriously wounded may require care for the rest of their lives.

We do not know the exact total of dead on the Iraqi side, which in some ways speaks to the shame of war. Numbers range anywhere from 100,000 deaths to 1 million. We will probably never know. We do know between 2 and 3 million Iraqis have become refugees – the homeless of war.

Ours was a preemptive attack based on misinformation that there were weapons of mass destruction. No such weapons were ever found. They were not there. This was an unjust war from the beginning, although our troops did their level best to be just in fighting the war. About \$1 trillion U.S. taxpayer dollars have been authorized to be spent in Iraq through the end of 2011. And, of course, there's also \$9 billion of U.S. taxpayer money “lost and unaccounted for” in this conflict, much of it actual equipment, including guns. Whom did we arm with these weapons? How will this massive waste fuel the next war? With questions about this seemingly endless war still real and raw, our soldiers are coming home.

I am proud of the women and men who served our country in the armed services. All of us should be proud of them. As they come home, we need to celebrate their return among us. Their coming home will change the landscape of our nation forever.

It is not easy to return from a desert, from a place where the sun beats down with no shade, no respite, and no cooling breeze. It is blindingly bright and you are never certain who and what awaits you in the shade of day or darkness of night. Add to that the challenges of returning from war itself, - which make this return 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 is not exactly the same anymore.

“Coming home for the holidays” can be challenging for many of us. All too often, memories of the holidays are not happy memories for people. We want them to be, 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 feel the sting of their absence. As your pastor, I have found this time of year to be hard for many people for many reasons. Those who can articulate the reasons share them with me or others. They build in ways and means of coping which are healthy and helpful to them and others when their homes feel empty.

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 a far desert land 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 ways to wander home to God this Christmas.

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 that 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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