

**"Home" for the Holidays**

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Jennie Ott ☩ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC ☩ 7 December 2008  
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There's a question I hear bounced around often,  
especially this time of year,  
and it's often asked of me:  
"Are you going home for the holidays?"

It's an interesting question,  
especially if you're like me,  
and have moved around so much,  
that "home" has ceased to be one geographic place.

I do have a home.  
It's about two miles from here, a nice yellow duplex.  
I've got a kitchen and a bed,  
a couple nice houseplants.  
I have great neighbors.  
It is "a" home, but is it "home" home?

My parents have a home, too,  
and I suppose that's what people are often asking about, when they wonder if I'm going home.  
My parents live in an old farmhouse in Massachusetts.  
They just moved there about 10 years ago,  
so it's not a city, an area, or a house I've ever lived in.  
When I am there I sleep in my old bed,  
but "my" room is the really the computer room.

Is it home?  
Yes and no.  
The place itself is not, but the things in it are familiar.  
And the people are familiar, too.  
I can count on my mom being in the kitchen, making all my favorite foods.  
And my dad can be found working out in the barn.  
And my brother and I revert to being 9 and 12 and drop into our own language, which is peppered with  
quotes from movies we used to watch as kids.  
It's the people who make that a home,  
but usually after a few days of being "home" in Massachusetts,  
I think I'm ready to come home to Minneapolis.

So what is this elusive "home?"  
How might you describe it for yourself? Is it landscape? Geography? People? A sense of belonging?

For me, I think "home" is the whole package. It's where I feel safe. It's where I feel loved. It's where I feel sheltered  
and protected. It's where I feel connected. It's where I am grounded.

And I think it's why Advent is such an important season for me, perhaps for all of us,  
because in many ways, it is the time when we take stock of our homes.  
Do we have one? Do we like the people who are in it? Are the people we love around us? Are some missing? Do we  
feel connected in our lives? Are we at home with ourselves? Are we grounded where we want to be?

I don't know about you, but I know I am experiencing some ungroundedness this season.

For me, more so than other years, the tethers seem more tenuous, the ground a little more uneven, my steps a bit more unsure.

Certainly I think we see that in our world,  
as the ground has been ripped out from under us economically.  
We can look around at this city, at our country, with its foreclosures and unemployment.  
people literally losing their homes...  
We can look at our own income or savings or retirement,  
and that security we counted on feels less solid.

Politically our world home feels less safe,  
as wars continue to rage  
as terrorism continues to rear its head.  
That peace and goodwill for all, well it seems a bit far off.

Environmentally, our fragile planet seems less like home,  
temperatures rising,  
glaciers melting,  
questions of energy and fuel production,  
some of which literally rips apart the ground beneath us.

And there are concerns of our hearts that may leave us ungrounded as well,  
relationships that are under strain,  
uncertainty about what the future holds for us—  
for our health, for our jobs, for our families.

And then, of course, there is the uneven ground of this place, this church,  
as we continue through transitions of leadership  
and try to envision what this home will look like and feel like in a year, in three years, in five years.

Advent is the time when I think on these things.  
Maybe it's the long nights,  
maybe it's the cold and the darkness,  
maybe it's because I'm corresponding with people I haven't talked to a year.  
But this is one of those natural times, in the seasons and in the church,  
when I stop and listen for where God is, and where my home is.

So much of the advent story is about people being away from their homes...  
a carpenter, a pregnant woman on a donkey,  
who were essentially homeless when the time came for the baby to be born.

Even the prophetic voice we hear this morning is also to a homeless people.  
The people of Judah had been forced out of their homes in Jerusalem when the city was besieged.  
Now they are in exile, living in a foreign land, away from their houses, their families, all that is familiar.  
They are ungrounded, unmoored.

It's in this context that God's words of comfort come to them.  
"Comfort, O comfort my people," are those first words of the prophet.  
and then the promise that God is preparing a way for them back to Jerusalem.  
A way that will no longer have the ups and downs of the mountains and valleys,  
no longer the rough places of exile,  
but all of it will be made level,  
and God the shepherd will come and lead them back. God will lead them home.

Imagine hearing this while you are far from home.  
It wasn't necessarily a magic formula, and it wasn't going to solve their short-term problems.

But it was a promise.

A promise, that while all was not well now,  
one day all would be well.

And while they still had to go on living their daily lives,  
working, living, under those conditions in a foreign territory,  
they were not forgotten.

The promise was there,  
and one day they would be home—really home—again.

This is why, I think, we read these passages in Isaiah and tell our Christmas stories, again and again every Advent.  
Because we ourselves need to be reminded that God comes to us,  
even in our homelessness, our brokenness, our ungroundedness.

It is why in Advent we are re-minded of what God is doing in the world.  
We tell these stories to ourselves and to one another,  
to hear again the good news that God has not forgotten us,  
or our world.

And I think it's why we do some of the traditions we do—  
writing newsy Christmas cards to friends and family,  
making our great grandmother's cinnamon spice cookies,  
getting out the felt ornaments we made in third grade.

We do it in order to be re-membered into our communities—  
of faith, of family, of friends.

These traditions remind us of where we've come from,  
of those parts of us that long for "home."

And it's why we look for signs of change and life around us.  
And this year, there are some signs...  
a new president who will take office in a month,  
days that will start to lengthen in a mere two weeks,  
birds that continue to sing on cold winter mornings...  
signs that our home is maybe not as far away as we'd thought.

Those promises that came to those people of Judah in exile,  
are also the promises that come to us.

It's the promise of every Advent season:

Comfort, comfort, O my people.

The world is bleak now, yes, but light is coming into this world.

That what we see now, will become a little brighter.

Where we walk now on the uneven ground,  
those paths will one day be evened out  
and the way will be made clear.

And even in those places where we feel homeless,

not to worry,

God will lead us back,

to the kind of home that is more than geography, more than family, more than shelter,  
but is deep connection and deep communion with all of life.

Yes, there is darkness now,  
and cold and long nights, and we do not know how long they will last...  
but put an ear to the uneven ground,

because there are footsteps...  
and there are signs...

That is what we celebrate in Advent.  
That is what we long for.

Let us wait for the signs of God coming in our midst.  
Let us remember that our shepherd is coming,  
    who will scoop us up  
    and hold us close to heart  
    and carry us to our home.

Amen.