**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, September 13, 2020 The 15th Sunday after Pentecost**

**Psalm 84, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 9-12**

**“Homecoming”**

**The Reverend Douglas T. King**

 I stood in the early morning darkness, waiting. Waiting for the sun to rise, waiting for a cab to come, waiting. It was late December and Christmas was on the way. But it felt too warm to be Christmastime. I was all of twenty-two years old on a street corner in San Diego, on my way to the airport, on my way home to New York.

I had been serving as a Volunteer in Mission of the PC(USA) working with Central American refugees in California and Mexico. This was my first trip home to visit my family and I was excited. I was excited to show them how much I had grown and changed; to share with them the stories of the deeply faithful people I had met and how they lived out their faith in the most challenging of circumstances.

And I was excited to be with people who knew who knew I was. But I was also a little nervous. I was not quite the same person. My family knew who I was, would they know and understand who I was now? Would my old home still feel like home? Who was I exactly in the midst of that home?

 This upcoming week our Jewish sisters and brothers will be celebrating Rosh Hashana, when the gates of heaven swing open, a bridge is laid down between heaven and earth, and the people are brought before the ineffable, and endless Creator of us all. In our text from Nehemiah this morning, when the Israelites gathered before the Water Gate on that Rosh Hashana so many centuries ago, they had been so far from home for so very long. They were exiled in Babylon, bereft of their temple, separated from the means by which they understood themselves as the children of God. Now they are finally home geographically. But sometimes coming home reveals to us we do not quite know who we are anymore. The temple and the city of Jerusalem were being rebuilt.

But we know that the brick and mortar of buildings merely create the space for the experience of home to occur. Home is something we find in each other and create together. And in so doing we learn who we are and who we are to each other. The Israelites hungered for a sense of self, and an understanding of who they were together. They needed to be reminded of who they were as God’s people. They needed to recapture their religious identity. They needed to hear the Torah read; to be told once more of the covenant between themselves and their God. They needed to joyously celebrate what an extravagant gift it is when a community of faith gathers together.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that this event was the start of the process of the creation of synagogues, places of worship and learning and fellowship where the identity of the Jewish people would be informed and celebrated to this very day. And it is from the proto-synagogues of Jesus’ time that the early church found a model to emulate. Thus that homecoming at the Water Gate helped to birth whom we are as the church today.

 It was in response to exile, to dislocation, to crisis that the seeds were planted to teach people of the Judeo-Christian tradition of how to live together. This is how we learned of the imperative need to gather in community together and be taught the covenant between God and humanity; to joyously worship the one who makes it all possible, and celebrate being together.

 Enough of the history lesson. It does not take a complex flow chart to see what this has to teach us. We are in the midst of our own exile of sorts. As diligently and faithfully as we have worked to continue being the church in the midst of pandemic, we have also been challenged to remember our identity; to be the body of Christ when we have not be bodily present with one another in the ways we wish. We long to gather round the font and baptize babies into the family of faith. We long to gather round the table and celebrate the banquet of heaven that is the Lord’s Supper. We long to hear our collective voices raised in song, lifting up prayers, reciting what we believe, sharing the peace of Christ physically present with one another.

These days apart have been a burden.

 But this disorienting time can function as a great blessing as well. In this time we have reached beyond our assumptions of what being the church has to look like. We have learned new ways to be together. We have been taught once again that God’s Holy Spirit will not be contained by the apparent limitations of our world.

 The compelling combination of our hunger to be the church bodily present together once more and the realization of the power of God’s Spirit to lead us forward in new ways is perhaps the greatest gift the church has received in a long time. We have a grand opportunity to grow exponentially in our life of faith together.

 In my mind there are two words that have defined what we have gained in this difficult and sometimes arduous time, power and possibility; the recognition of the power of God’s Spirit to inspire and shape who the church is in every new season, and the possibility of new ways to be the church together.

 And there are two words that can shape our response to what lies ahead for us, passion and purpose; in this time of bodily absence we have discovered a passion for how important the church is to us. Now we have the opportunity to translate that energy into purposeful action in our efforts to continue growing into the children of God we have been called to become. And as we the church seek to be reminded of who we are together, we are called to remember who we are to be in the midst of this world. We live in a time where so many are hurting so deeply. People are suffering from the isolation of what life looks like in the midst of pandemic. People are struggling to find work, to make the next rent or mortgage payment, to put food on the table for their families. We are all anguishing over the racial divisions in this country, it feels as if the fabric of what makes us a single nation is at risk of being torn. When we are reminded of who we are together as the church we know we must respond to this brokenness. We must strive to stand for justice and for peace; to be a compassionate and healing presence for one and all.

 Any time the church goes through a period of change we may feel some anxiety. We worry over the potential loss of what has made our life together precious for so many years. We long for our home together to return and fear that we may not recognize it when we return to it. New challenges, a new context, a new pastor create both hopes and fears in a church family.

 All those years ago when I landed at LaGuardia Airport with my cool California sunglasses on, my heart leapt for joy. I was filled with expectation but also a hint of anxiety. Would it still feel like home for me? And of course it was not exactly the same. We were not the same. I had grown. They had grown. Life had changed.

Yet we were all indeed home together. We gathered around the table and shared the stories, the great biscuit throwing incident of Thanksgiving 1975; the time I swung a cabinet door open and accidentally gave my mother a black eye; the time when my cousin Robbie was graduating from MIT and we celebrated by an arm wrestling competition between Robbie and my father. We were gathered around the Water Gate and were receiving the richness of our story as a family.

 As you all wait in expectation to be bodily present together once more, if the way be clear, if you so choose, I wait in expectation to join you in your midst. I long to hear and learn the stories of this family of faith; to be told the history of what has shaped you into the vital community of believers that you are; to learn the traditions that you all cherish together; to serve beside you and discover exactly how God’s Spirit is at work here. And I long to share who I am with you. I long to tell my stories of the people and places that have shaped me.

 And as you tell your stories and I tell my stories we will gather before the story we share, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We will gather together around the Water Gate, and be reminded of who we are and more importantly whose we are. And a bridge between heaven and earth will be laid down. We will rejoice at the abundance of blessings we have received and are receiving. And having learned once more of the power of God’s Holy Spirit and the endless possibilities before us we will dream together. We will begin to write the story of the home we will share as we serve our God together.

 When they gathered at that Water Gate all those many centuries ago there were many more questions than answers before them. But in the sharing of the covenant they had received from their God; in being reminded of their story of who they truly were and whose they truly were, they had all they needed to move forward.

 I have always been a big fan of a quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the author of “The Little Prince.” He wrote, “If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

 As we worship together this morning we do not, we cannot know the details of all that is to come. But we know the single most important thing. We know for what we long. We long to continue being the body of Christ together this day and for all our days to come. And with God’s Holy Spirit, we will transform that longing into faithful action. We will continue to grow into the people God created us to be; and the family of faith God created us to be. And we will celebrate, for “the joy of the Lord will be our strength.

Thanks be to God. Amen.