

“Repent!”
Luke 3:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Second Sunday of Advent, 5 December 2021
Matt Matthews

Last week, Rachel, John Mark, and I worshipped at the Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. Our other two sons had returned home by then; so, the three of us gathered with friendly strangers who registered us by computer at the door as part of their Covid precautions.

It was cool outside, but not cold like it had been all week. That sanctuary provided ample, warm space for us to settle in. The church has a tall ceiling, as we have here. Their sanctuary is darker, but like in our sanctuary, your eyes are drawn up to the light streaming into stained glass. We sat closely together on our pew, as others sat on theirs, some alone, some in pairs or in clumps, all of us together. *A holy unity. Church. Family. Church family.*

In her sermon, the preacher talked about feeling homesick. She asked us about home, as I’m asking you. Where is home for you? Who is your home? How do you define home? When’s the last time somebody said to you, “Welcome home,” and what did they mean by those words?

One definition of home for me is people: My mother and father, mom’s cooking, walking to the water with my dad. The dogs and cats I’ve called family. My Uncle Jim and Aunt Ginny and the stories they told of old Hampton. Uncle Bob out in Burbank, gay but too afraid to tell us until weeks before he died. These people, all these faces, alive and dead, crowding in around me. Home.

Home is your people.

What if you don’t have people? What if the people you have don’t love? What if your people are negligent or hurtful or absent or mean?

Another definition of home for me is a sense of place. I was born on the southern Chesapeake Bay. In the mornings, you’d watch the crabbers pulling their pots through morning mist into blazing summer heat; in the afternoons, when the wind blew from Hampton Creek, you’d smell those same crabs being steamed at Amory’s Wharf, then being picked and canned. Home is a place, an address, a physical space.

Where is your home? Who is your home?

One of my boys lives in Manhattan. One in Asheville. One in Baltimore. Are these places home, all three at once, or none at all? Are these young men my home even though we seldom sit at the same dinner table anymore? Is Champaign home? What about my home town? What about Rachel’s people in Austin—are they home? Is memory home?

Where is your home?

I spent that short sermon contemplating where and what home was. Despite lacking a satisfying answer to that curious question—for that moment, I was serenely contented that that pew in that welcoming church was my home in those heavy, holy, sweet moments. I did not know if home was the place I came from, or the place to which I was going. Was home a place at all? These questions swirled around me, but for that moment that church was my home. That building. Those people. That congregation. Our united cause to serve God and to love God and to enjoy God and to sing, sing, sing God’s praises. Home.

Where is your home?

Is home like Margaritaville—a state of mind? That’s the way Jimmy Buffet sings about the islands, and Billy Joel about New York, and Tony Bennet about San Francisco.

Where is home? A week ago, thinking of you, wondering what I was missing here, keeping you in my Sunday morning prayers, I pondered home.

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John the Baptist knows all about home. He knows the way. He wades into the Jordan River and jumps out of the pages of scripture proclaiming this message:

Home is with God.

And Jesus is the way. God may reveal God’s self to the Muslim, Jew, Taoist, Agnostic, and other groups in other ways, but for the Christian, and for these potential Jesus-followers gathered by the Jordan River, Jesus is the way.

John eagerly proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The word “repent” means to turn. It means to turn towards God. That’s what John the Baptist wants his listeners to do. It’s easy to get a little bit off-course, so repent, reorient yourself to God, turn away from your way towards God’s way. Repent. And God has sent Jesus for you to know and follow.

In Jesus, nothing will separate us from God’s love. Jesus is the one who is lifting up the low valleys and breaking down the walls of hostility that divide. Stay focused on Jesus, John is saying. Watch what Jesus does—and try to do what he does yourself, in your own way, using the gifts God has given you. See who Jesus loves—and try to love likewise. Widen your circle of friends. Be practical: If you have two coats, give one away to the person who has none. Provide food to folk who are hungry. Get to know your neighbor. Give of your time, talent, treasure. Celebrate the bounty of God’s creation. Thank God for land and sky and sea. Be grateful. Seek justice.

When we live this way, we find that we’ve arrived. We’ve made it. We’ve made it home. No longer are we homeless or lost or bereft or hopeless. Every place has become thin with glory; different languages praise God under the same roof; the holy abides on earth as it does in heaven; crooked places are made straight; friendships flourish; old hurts are mended; human laughter becomes healing balm; kindness is benediction; rough places are made smooth in ways beyond our understanding.

No, life’s not easy. The recent lockdown of Central High and myriad other daily happenings reminds us of this unfortunate reality. But when we are standing with God, we are home. Life may be hard, but we are whole. We are right where we are supposed to be.

Home is with God—our rock, our sure foundation. our port in the storm. our companion along the way. Emmanuel: God with us.

John the Baptist is shouting, standing on his tippy toes, shouting to the crowd so everyone can hear. Repent! Turn! Look!

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We have no record that John the Baptist sang in that river, but if he did, he might have sung these words. Help me:

O come let us adore him.

O come let us adore him.

O come let us adore him—Christ the Lord.

Welcome home.