

Our Dwelling Place in All Generations
Reformation Sunday/Dedication Sunday
Psalm 90:1-6, 14, 17

John 3:16-17

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

I Corinthians 12:4-7

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;

⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;

⁶and there are varieties of activities,

but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Psalm 90:1-6, 14, 17

¹LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³You turn us back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

⁴For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁷Let the favor of the LORD our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—

O prosper the work of our hands!

The Sermon

Remember, if you will, some of the adults whom you used to see and know when you were small. I'm not asking you to come up with an exhaustive catalogue, just inviting you to draw up a visual memory of some whom you may remember.

Older relatives.

Neighbors.

Friends of your parents, and the parents of your friends.

Teachers.

Coaches, music teachers, choir directors, dance instructors.

Crossing guards, lifeguards, shopkeepers, preachers, custodians, beauticians, garbage collectors, nurses, doctors, dental hygienists, exterminators, plumbers.

Think, if you will, of the most elderly people you saw when you were young.

Did you know your grandparents? Great-grandparents? Great-great-grandparents?

Did you have aunts or uncles or great aunts or great uncles?

Or, do you have childhood memories of being around elderly people whom you didn't necessarily know?

I think back to Sunday mornings in church, or to seeing my grandparents in the company of people their age, and just having a sense of being around people of accumulated wisdom and general goodwill.

Sometimes I'll see documentary footage from a certain time, or a well-done movie about the Midwest that takes place many decades ago, and I can just look at the screen and say, "I know those people."

I had been planning on asking you to ruminate on the image that comes first to your mind when I say the word "home." But I think that Psalm 90 is, in fact, inviting us to think even further. All those people that you may have pictured in the

last few minutes: what images do you think may have come to *their* minds whenever somebody said the word “home”?

And what do your “home” images have in common with theirs?

When someone says the word “home,” do you flash on an image from the past? Is it a place, or a circumstance, from your earliest memories—a place you remember and think about and sometimes dream about?

What places do you think haunted or inspired those people whose faces come to mind when you think of people from earlier in your life?

Or, is home for you something that you are making for yourself in your current circumstances? Is it the space you occupy when you feel most comfortable being yourself, without having to put on airs or makeup? Is home, for you, a person, or a number of people, with whom you share your life?

What was home for some of the grown-ups you remember from your younger days? Did that sense of “home” sustain them the way yours sustains you? What do you suppose it looked like? And how did *they* see it? What did they need to get out of the feeling of being at home?

Or is home something in your future? Is home a goal, a place that you are trying to get to—or that you feel you will inevitably end up?

All of us have occupied this world alongside some who are no longer here. For many of us in this room, whole generations that we can clearly remember are no longer here.

And we learn that we make our mark, in our time.

If we are fortunate, we remember people whom we still feel we look up to, even years or decades since they’ve been gone from this life—people who made their mark in their time, and whose inspiration continues to carry on, if only in our distant memories.

And if we are exceptionally fortunate, we had people—older people—who somewhere along the line expressed pride or joy in, or at least amusement with, us younger folks. And that affirmation, no matter how small, still makes us feel that they are somehow with us.

This was their world for a while—as generations, I mean. They came up in the world and ran the show for a while, and then, piece by piece, family by family, moment by moment, they passed it on to those who would come after them.

Ten years go by; twenty years; fifty, seventy-five. And the faces change, and the styles and fashions we saw in our childhood, of clothes and buildings and speech patterns and cars, become antiquated. And we keep moving up the chain.

“LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.”

How does God speak to you in your time?

What does it mean to be at home in God, to know that God is your own dwelling place?

What do the life and death and resurrection of Jesus mean to you, in your time?

What does it mean to you that God has been the dwelling place of all those who came before you, and all those who will come after?

How do you choose to participate in that?

At the presbytery meeting last Tuesday, toward the end of the day, Amy Cantrell gave a short presentation she'd been invited to deliver on behalf of a ministry in Asheville called BeLoved. It's one of the recipients of the Nickel-a-Meal offerings that we contribute each month in worship (and will be received a week from today).

Standing in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church, she said:

God is hungry. God's belly is growling.

God is on a fixed income.

God loves strawberries but rarely can afford them.

God is getting forced out of her home due to gentrification.

God's healthcare and food stamps are being cut.

God is hungry.

And so is Ms. Edna, Ms. Claudia, Ms. Dorothy, Mr. Joe, Mr. Johnny, and Mr. Vaughn, who says he has made it to 100 because of the hot peppers he [eats] every day.

Just blocks from here is the wilderness. There God brings manna. There God spreads a table. There, instead of a food pantry, we set up a farmer's market.

Volunteers from every walk of life—
retired Presbyterian pastors and 20-something anarchists,
people living on the street, and young mothers
spread tablecloths, fill baskets with food,
fill baskets with veggies, fruit, bread, eggs, and milk.

There is God's table in the wilderness.

The first time we entered this wilderness, we met Ms. Bellew. She was ninety years old and living along on a fixed income. She walked slowly with a walker. We had made an announcement that we were from BeLoved Asheville across the street and we had come to share a farmer's market. Everything is free. But she is hard of hearing. So she came up to me with a roma tomato in her hand and a [small] black change purse. She looked at me with plaintive eyes and said, "How much?" I handed her a bag and said [it's] free, it's all free. Take as much as you need!" She filled the bag. And that was the difference in her need and what she can afford. A roma tomato or a bag brimming over with the freshest food on the planet.ⁱ

Amy continued,

There is a famine in the land. There are six food deserts in Asheville alone.

60 percent of people in Western North Carolina are surviving on \$1000 a month or less.

9 out of 10 say their number one coping strategy for a lean food budget is buying the cheapest food available regardless of the health content.

Three-quarters make choices between food and heat;
half between food and housing,
63% choose between food and medicine.

At BeLoved Asheville, we try to practice sharing food and doing food justice. Through the Nickel-A-Meal program of the Presbytery of WNC, God is indeed setting a table for one and all. We are so grateful to your support of this kind of “life together,” sharing the bread of communion and justice.ⁱⁱ

On Tuesday, it will be exactly half a millennium since Luther unleashed his 95 theses and a Christian movement was born that continues to reverberate throughout the world, highlighting Biblical truths that can never be hidden away or held apart from the world again.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

“By grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

We have spent this month not only celebrating the first 500 years of the Reformation,

but also giving thanks for what God has done, and declaring our unwavering trust in what God will do, in and for and with this specific church family, succinctly summarized in two lines from Psalm 115:

“The LORD *has been* mindful of us;
God *will* bless us.”

So on this day when it is appropriate to reflect on the gift of the Reformers and the Reformation of the Church that they sought, perhaps it’s not too inappropriate to give thanks, too, for the Holy Spirit’s continual activity in all the Churches of the world, all our neighbors and siblings in Christ.

Reformation Sunday is not a time to strut around as if we were better than any other Christian, any other Church, or any other person on earth. It’s a day to give thanks for God’s ongoing activity in the world, and to seek God’s strength and guidance for us to participate in that activity.

With that in mind, I close with a blessing attributed to a 20th-century American Catholic nun named Sister Rita Steinhagen, which so wonderfully encapsulates

many of the ideals that Reformed Protestantism seeks to instill in all followers of Christ:

May God bless you with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
so that you will live deep in your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation
of people and the earth,
so that you will work for justice, equity, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer,
so you will reach out your hands to comfort them
and change their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with the foolishness
to think that you can make a difference in the world,
so you will do the things which others say cannot be done.ⁱⁱⁱ

LORD, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Let the favor of the LORD our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
October 29, 2017

ⁱ These are excerpts from the text which Amy Cantrell of BeLoved Asheville read at the October 24, 2017 meeting of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. I am grateful that she shared the full text with me.

ⁱⁱ See previous note.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have not been able to identify any source previous to Sister Rita Steinhagen for this blessing which has become somewhat familiar, so unless and until I can do so, I attribute these words to her.