

House of God

1 Peter 1:2-10; John 14:1-14

May 22, 2011

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Most of you are probably aware of the prediction of 89 year old Family Radio preacher, Harold Camping that the end of the world was coming and it would be the beginning of what some Christians call the Rapture. All the true Christians would be suddenly taken up to heaven, and the rest would be left behind for a period of terrible times – called the tribulation.

Camping's prediction was that it would begin on May 21, 2011. The fact that we are all here means that it either did not happen or that we missed the sweet chariot that would swing low and take believers up to that mansion in the sky. Camping did say that it would all begin with a massive earthquake so, unless I missed something, I'm going with "it didn't happen."

How appropriate that our text, already selected for this week, has to do with Jesus telling the disciples that he is leaving, but that he will come back and take them to where he is. He is going to prepare a room for them. I would have to say this, and the 23rd Psalm, are by far the top Bible verses I preach from at funerals.

Anna Carter Florence, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Columbia Theological Seminary writes: "these first few verses are pure heart. They are a warm embrace. They are comfort food, plain and simple. Nothing is more soothing, more evocative of childhood, than the words, 'your room is ready and waiting for you. Why don't you go on up?'"

The disciples were afraid. Jesus had made some very disturbing statements just prior to this verse. He had washed their feet and shared a meal and then broke the news (again) that his time on earth was about to end. In fact, he had told them that Judas would betray him and that Peter would deny him. What were they to think? What was going to happen to them?

So Jesus said these words, "do not let your hearts be troubled." Trust me. Trust God. Many translations use the word *believe* here, but the word *trust* is also a perfect way to translate the same word. Many scholars seem to think trust works better in this context. These are people who already believe. They know Jesus. They've witnessed the healing of the blind and the lepers, the casting out of demons, feeding a multitude with a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish. They were there for the raising of Lazarus from death to life.

"Trust me," says Jesus. "In my Father's house are many rooms. I'm going there to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you to be there with me."

It brings to mind a song that was sung by a Christian Rock group – Audio Adrenaline - back in the '90's – "**My Father's House:**"

*Come and go with me
To my fathers house*

*It's a big big house
With lots and lots a room
A big big table
With lots and lots of food*

A big big yard
Where we can play football
A big big house
Its my fathers house

While in Kansas, I led a bible study for some residents at the Presbyterian Manor. As we were studying this passage, I asked those wise, seasoned Christians which translation they preferred – the King James, which reads “in my Father’s House are many mansions” or other, more contemporary versions which read – “many rooms or dwelling places.”

The majority of them told me they preferred the word *mansions*. I thought it was because they grew up with the King James Version of the Bible. But no, they told me the word *mansion* just brings to mind such a wonderful image – a big, big, house, with lots and lots of room for everybody. There is no shortage of space. There is no turning some away because we ran out of room. These were wonderful friends who appreciated, at that time of their lives, having a place where they could talk about end- of-life matters and dream of what might be waiting for them on the other side of their earthly life.

I have a more difficult time relating realistically to a mansion. The only mansion I’ve ever been in was actually a castle in southern Bavaria, Germany – Neuschwanstein Castle, built by King Ludwig II. While it was fascinating to visit, I would not want to live in a huge, cold place like that – especially for eternity.

I relate more with the word *room*. Growing up in a small farmhouse where I shared a room with 2 little sisters and my 3 brothers all shared a room, having a room of my own was something I dreamed of. A home where I had a place that was my own space would have been a luxury. A place with my things, that represented me – the things I liked and cared about. But, while I longed for my own room, I was so glad to be a part of my family. I was thankful to belong in that home.

It’s really about belonging, isn’t it - knowing that there is a place where you belong? A place that is especially for you, yet still in the family. When I moved out of the house, I was dismayed at how fast my space disappeared! Naturally, my sisters were glad to have more room (I’m sure they appreciated not having to listen to a big sisters griping at them, too – although I know they missed me). But it was hard at first to go “home” and not find a place there that was mine.

I suspect many students who move away from home to go to college experience something like this. Some of you do have your old room to come home to, but if the house is crowded, it may seem like your space is disappearing. Yet, for a while, you are in transition – a temporary dorm room or apartment might feel a bit like your space, but it still isn’t quite the same thing as home. It doesn’t have that permanent feeling.

Belonging is key to what Jesus was saying to his dear friends. “Trust me. You belong with me. Mi casa, su casa. My house is your house. I’ll get your room ready.”

So, what do we do in the meantime? Where is home while we wait? Well, I think Peter speaks beautifully to that. He was writing to these exiled people who were under persecution by the Romans. Very likely, the building that represented the house of God – the temple in Jerusalem –

had been destroyed, and Peter may have been thinking about those massive stones that were just laying there, scattered from the destruction. But, Peter tells the people that *they* are now the house of God, they are the stones for the new temple – the living stones that are rooted deep in the foundation of Jesus, who is the cornerstone of their faith. They are now the priests for this house of God – they are people who are chosen – people who have a place of belonging – no matter what is going on in their lives, no matter what kind of hardships they have – they have a spiritual home together. Peter tells them to keep longing for “spiritual milk” just as a baby keeps coming back for its mother’s milk.

So, here we are. We keep coming back every week for worship, for feeding on the Word of God, for breaking bread and drinking wine, for sharing our joys and our burdens, for teaching and growing and walking together – that is our spiritual milk and if we choose to not eat for a while – we are likely to get a bit weaker.

The house of God, the Kingdom of God, is a place called Church. Don’t you think that’s what the purpose of the Church is about? Providing room – a place for belonging – a place where we continue the work that Jesus said his followers would do – and even greater work because he was leaving and sending the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father. And you know the way.” Thomas said, “We don’t know where you are going, so of course, we don’t know the way. But, of course, we DO know the way. It is the way of Jesus. It is the way of the cross. What does that mean? It means it is the way of giving ourselves for the sake of others. It is the way of forgiving others even when they’ve hurt us beyond belief. It is the way of being non-judgmental, of accepting people as they are, of offering food, and compassion and unconditional love. It is welcoming everyone and showing generous hospitality. It is including all and not shutting anyone out. That is the way of Christ. That is the way of the Church of Christ.

I’ll admit something to you. I’m not nearly as insightful as people like Harold Camping claims to be. As a pastor who studies regularly and prays a lot, I don’t have a clue as to when Jesus will come back or how that will even look. I don’t know why we would use scare tactics to put the world into a panic. I don’t know for sure if people who don’t believe in Jesus will be left behind, if that is the way it goes. I’d like to think that a big, big house of God means that somehow we will all find room there to live together.

What I do know is that Jesus says to trust him. He has built a house of God with living stones – people he has chosen - like you and me – to demonstrate that trust in the way we live, and the mercy we offer, and the hospitality we extend. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” We are living in the kingdom of God right now. Is it complete? No. Is it perfect? Not until it’s complete. When will that be? When Christ returns. And when is that? God only knows. But we know Jesus. And we can trust him.

If you don’t know him, look around. There are people here who will joyfully, non-judgmentally introduce you to him. Your room is ready. Your pew – ready. Your place in fellowship – ready and waiting. Your place in a Sunday School class to learn and grow – or teach, ready. There is room for you to do outreach in the community and the world. Your room is ready. You belong here. Thanks be to God.

© Copyright 2011. All Rights Reserved.