

Where do you Find the Spirit?

Psalm 121

September 13, 2020

The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

Homecoming Sunday/Safe at Home Sunday

Prayer: *O God, wherever we are listening to this, help us to find our home in you. Help us to trust that you are our keeper, that you keep our going out and our coming in, no matter how that looks in a pandemic. Help us to find our way to your spirit's calling, to right paths and green pastures, even in our restricted activities...*

They will tell you, you can't sleep alone in a strange place
Then they'll tell you, you can't sleep with somebody else
Ah, but sooner or later you sleep in your own space
Either way it's O.K. you wake up with yourself
--It's a Billy Joel song called "My Life"

In this pandemic, the question of where do you find yourself, what can you do with your time, where is home for you now, has been elevated to new levels.

Of course we have scrambled to answer many of these questions right here in the church; right along with you and our wider community.

If we can't gather, and our identity is gathering, and if we can't eat together and our Lord broke bread with his disciples, if there are no hugs and handshakes, no visits to members in the hospital, no big summer weddings, a homecoming picnic, no large memorial services to mourn the dead and support those who grieve... who are we? What are we becoming?

I know that I am not alone in noticing that the pandemic has stretched out long enough, for many new habits to be established and reinforced. And it isn't at all the way we would want to choose it.

Our scripture today is Psalm 121 which is much loved and often quoted. It is short, easy to memorize in English, and uplifting. This psalm helps to remind us how to ground ourselves spiritually. Where are you at home? Where do you find the spirit?

The opening question "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come?" isn't asking quite the question it sounds like. In this era everyone believed in spirits, they saw them everywhere. All manner of gods were worshiped. This person is lifting up their eyes to the hills, and wondering if their god is a god of the hills, the earth, the harvest, the god the Canaanites worshipped? Or maybe Apollo has driven his chariot across the sky and requires a sacrifice of a goat or chicken... no...none of them.

"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." We won't worship the earth or the heavens, our God is responsible for all of it. And then the psalm seeks to describe this God who isn't visible if you look up to the hills, "God will keep you, God will not be absent from you as one who sleeps. The Lord is your keeper."

You will not be struck down by Apollo (the sun) or any of the moon gods or goddesses. The Lord will keep you. That is God's identity. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. The Lord is behind and through the physical world. Revealed fully in the New Testament, God is love. That is our home. God's love.

If the Lord is our keeper, what does that mean in this time of Covid?

I'm here to tell you that I do not have all the answers. But I am committed to work with you to figure them out. I also want to bear witness to how many of you have done really well under these unprecedented days to re-imagine what discipleship looks like in the time of Covid19.

- The Black Lives Matter prayer walk had people walking prayerfully in the front of the church, socially distanced, wearing masks, meditating on the value of a life.
- When we had to go virtual in March, I was told that the folks in our book groups would not be comfortable meeting online. Not the right generation, not their custom. Okay. I understand that. A few days later, I was told in no uncertain terms that they would be continuing online. No, it isn't comfortable, not everyone is onboard, but the alternative is not meeting at all. And they weren't having it. They helped each other figure it out.
- First Church Academy closed in March, and then opened in June under Covid protocols which have been going well, children have a positive and safe place to go during the day, parents can return to work.
- You have collected food, raised money, responded to crises, stayed in touch with one another.
- Amie Giguere and I have continued to do small memorial and graveside services, intimate weddings, we pray with people online and conduct communion services over zoom and recordings. If you had asked me in February if I would ever record a communion service, I'd have given theological reasons why I wouldn't do that. As soon as we realized the conditions the pandemic was creating, that none of us would have communion for a very long time if we didn't do it online, well, I revised my theology. Its required by the times.

And because we have all had to re-think so much of our lives in this time, I'd like to suggest to you another way of thinking about home. This is inspired by the poet Emily Dickenson, who is known to have lived out most of her life, never leaving her father's house in Amherst, Mass. And yet, she had a rich interior life which is reflected in her poetry – one of the greatest American poets our country has produced. I have wondered if it is because she chose such a restricted physical home, that she found another home in poetry... she writes:

*I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – For Doors --*

She claims "Possibility" as her dwelling. "I dwell in possibility." In her dwelling of possibility there are numerous windows, even more doors – things open up in possibility.

And so I'm going to ask you again, on this Homecoming Sunday, where are you living? If the answer is fearfulness or anxiety, despair or illness. Consider where your help may come from.

The Lord is your keeper, not the hills, not the sun, not the moon, the lord will keep you. Find your way home to God. And there you may dwell in possibilities...there you'll find the Spirit is moving, God is still speaking, we have so much ahead of us... wherever you are, you can be home, God is your keeper, and we are in this together.

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