

“Longing for Home”: A sermon for Trinity Presbyterian Church on January 28, 2024

Genesis 3:22 ²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever”— ²³ therefore the LORD God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which they were taken. ²⁴ He drove out the humans, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Rev 21:1-6 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals.
God will dwell^[b] with them;
they will be God’s peoples,^[c]
and God Godself will be with them and be their God;^[d]
⁴ God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for^[e] the first things have passed away.”

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also they said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then they said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

The word of our Lord, thanks be to God.

Introduction: My name is Rev. Julianne Porrás-Center

But before we get too further into worship today, I'm wondering if you'll do a bit of an experiment with me – yeah? A meditation – don't worry.

I want you all to close your eyes for a moment and I want you to imagine... the last place you felt at home..

Maybe it's the home you live in now. Maybe it's this very church, or your study, a particular park you like to visit.

Maybe you're right now in a place you left behind.. a childhood bedroom, a kitchen table surrounded by familiar faces..

Wherever it is, I want you to take it in. What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are you smelling?

What is it that makes this home? How does it make you feel? Maybe you feel safety.. or joy... or comfort.. a level of understanding or belonging. Some kind of community... perhaps. Love.

How does it feel in your body? Are your shoulders relaxed? Your breaths are deep..

DEEP BREATH

Okay now, slowly and when you're ready, I want you to think about a time when you didn't feel at home.

When you felt restless. Or uncomfortable. Out of place. Like you didn't belong, like you didn't fit in.

What does that feel like? Are you jittery? Is there a sinking dread in your stomach? A tightening of your muscles?

What's different than the memory of feeling at home? Is it the people? Is it the place? Is it.. nothing at all? Just some abstract feeling like something is amiss?

Is it mental, emotional, physical, -- or is it almost spiritual, this feeling out of place?

Okay, now that I've made you uncomfortable, you can open your eyes. Take a deep breath. You're safe here.

I want to talk to you today about that concept of not feeling at home. Because not only is it a personal preoccupation of mine, not only do I think it is theologically rich, full of good Biblical exegesis – but it also is one of the theological underpinnings of what we're doing down in Watsonville. And I'm so excited to share that with you.

But as I do so, I want you to remember what those two experiences felt like today, want you to embody what we're talking about. And I ask you, if you will, to do this as you to join me on a fairly ambitious project today –

I'd like to talk about this feeling of home and its corresponding feeling of exile in two ways.

First, I'd like to locate this sensation in the Biblical narrative – the story of everything. For this, we'll enlist our scriptures, from the very first and the very last books of the Bible. We'll try to answer questions like: Why do we not feel at home? What is our Christian call in the midst of that feeling?

AND THEN, once we've done all that big universalizing narrative work – then I'd like to scale us down to the particular context of Watsonville. And the ministry that town needs. And the ministry we are hoping to do with your help.

That sound doable? Alright.

So first—the story of everything. Our first scripture brings us right to the beginning – but not the very beginning of everything. In the beginning, if you'll recall, God created the heavens and the

earth, humans and creatures, and called it Good. We, humans were placed in a garden – our home – a place where God and we could dwell together and everything was perfect, right?

Well, not exactly. We were humans after all, and what do we humans do – we long for things! We want, we want too much! We did the one forbidden thing.. and we were exiled from the Garden. Compelled not to live in our perfect home, but to wander East of Eden, conveniently the book I read in preparation to move to this beautiful central coast.

Miroslav Volf, a professor of mine at Yale who wrote this morning's preparation for worship, believes as so many existential philosophers and life lovers have, that this story was written to explain and give words to the feeling that we all have – a feeling of exile, of not being at home, of things just not being right.

In fact, reading the bible, this theme of exile is everywhere. Israelites wandering far from home. Prophets feeling far from home in their native land. People longing for a world where justice reigns because God lives in intimate relationship with humanity.

And where does this theme reach its fulcrum? As Christians, we locate it in the incarnation of Christ, where, as the Gospel of John writes, the word becomes flesh and dwells with us. Christ feels our suffering. Christ feels our exile. But Christ does not leave us in the feeling of discomfort.. he doesn't just empathize

He brings us home. Or rather, he gives us a way to walk ourselves home. To make this earth, imperfect as it is, a welcoming home not just for each other, but a place for God to dwell with us.

A place, where as the book of Revelation prophesies, ⁴ God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more

Because the home of God will be among us mortals.

In other words, we won't feel so alone. We won't feel so broken. We will feel the full presence of God among us. We will feel like we did when we closed our eyes and imagined home – only greater. In other words, according to these theologians, the goal of Christian life is not serving God so that we can go to heaven. The meaning of life is serving God so that heaven can come to us.

Here -- where we are at. In the thick of all the brokenness and messiness, all the human wanting and wandering. Amidst disease and death, war and poverty, depression and darkness, amidst all the things that make us know that things are not as they should be, that make us feel like God is so far from us – Here. We are called to bring the New Jerusalem here to Santa Cruz County.

That's how we locate our place in the Story of Everything.

And it's exactly that theological impulse that is behind our new ministry in Watsonville. We've called it Somos – which means “we are” for the idea que “Somos la iglesia. Somos el cuerpo de cristo. Somos hechos en la imagen de Dios. Somos sagrados.”

We are the church. We are the body of Christ. We are made in the image of God. We are holy. And not just on Sunday morning, and not just when we are in church, but always.

You see, when I moved to Watsonville, three things became immediately clear.

One, Watsonville is a town so deeply in need of love. You all know. The poverty statistics don't do justice to the number of people who despite working incredibly hard, just don't have enough to eat. The low education and graduation rates don't do justice to the lack of literacy in the community. And the crime rates don't do justice to the feeling at insecurity and fear that many live with.

Two, Watsonville is filled with people for whom the feeling of exile is not abstract, but literal. Upwards of 85% of the community identifies as Latino – many are first generation immigrants, people who left behind their families, their cultures, their languages, everything they considered

“home” for the hope of a better life. And many are second or third generation, people who are considered “ni de aqui ni de alla” – neither from here nor there. Young people – and there are a lot of them, with 25% of the city under the age of 18 -- often live their lives translating between the homes of their parents and the home they happened to be born into. They don’t feel quite “American,” but they also don’t feel quite, say, Mexican. They aren’t always sure where they belong.

And third, if we were seeking to meet the unmet needs of this community, a traditional church model wasn’t quite going to work. There are already quite a lot of traditional churches in Watsonville – and as a result, there are already a lot of preconceived notions about what churches are – and very few of those notions tell people that they are loved and holy and sacred no matter who they are, no matter where they are from, no matter who they love, and no matter what they believe.

And so the question became not only how can we tell people these truths, but how can we show them—

And so after a lot of conversations with local nonprofits, a lot of praying, and a lot of planning by the Watsonville Administrative Commission, Somos was born: A non-profit and bilingual coffee shop and community space where young people can gather, build meaningful relationships, and participate in community-led recreational and cultural events and activities, and, hopefully, study.

Located in a building I know many of you know well, right between Watsonville High and Cabrillo College, we hope to establish a sanctuary in the city where young people feel empowered to explore and experience emotional, psychological, and spiritual wholeness. And to get them in the door, we’re offering free coffee, comfy couches, and a welcoming presence.

All of this -- to make people feel at home. To help them to find their particular role in the story of everything.

We've been open for a week and – well it's been heartbreaking and inspiring to see just how much people have needed it.

I want to tell just three brief stories, introduce you to three anonymized people who have come through the doors of the chapel-turned-café, just so that you have an idea of the beautiful depth of humanity that is walking through those doors.

Fabian, who has lived in his car for 5 years with his wife who suffers from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, who says he doesn't worry because he has met Jesus face to face in a vision. He works as a janitor during the night, and during the day he cares for his wife, a woman who everyone else has given up on, including any churches they have tried to attend, which have repeatedly kicked them out. Maybe it's manic episodes, or maybe it's Fabian's tendency to preach a little in everyday conversation, but either way, they are holy. And giving them a place to pause their exile, if even for an hour each day, is part of making this world a home for God.

There's Elisa, a neighbor nearby, who is just about the most friendly person you can imagine. After stopping by for a cup of coffee and a chat, she brought her daughter, then her granddaughters, then 3 friends, then about another 7, most of whom, despite being past retirement age, are farmworkers who showed me the arthritis in their hands from their hard labor. But my favorite moment was when Elisa came alone and brought nobody, and we chatted for hours about the little town she left behind in Mexico, filled with adventures of wild animals, and hunger, sure, but not hunger like she sees here. And pain, sure, but not pain like she saw in Watsonville during the pandemic. She almost lost her husband, calls it a miracle that she didn't, and saw so many lose loved ones. As she teared up telling the story, as it seemed to slip out of her mouth, I wondered how long she had been carrying all this trauma, who she had to share it with. And then I felt grateful that this little chapel-turned-café could be a space where she could finally set it down for a moment. I felt sure God was there.

And then there are the kids – some punk kids, some “good” kids, some kids who aren't quite sure about me yet, but who look relieved to have a bean bag chair to flop onto instead of a deskchair. There's Daniel, who came with two friends the first day, and about six the next, even more the

next. Who said his weekend was “chaotic to say the least” but didn’t get into it, but who lingered probably a little longer than he should have three days in a row, just to talk to me and whatever stranger was in there next, and to take in the “chill vibes” to draw a heart with an infinity sign in it on the chalkboard wall. He’s not sure what he wants to do after graduation, but he longs for more outside of Watsonville – stayed to hear the story of one person’s eighth grade trip to Washington DC, was amazed by stories of my road trip across the country to arrive here. And I can’t help but wonder if he would be more likely to wander freely if he knew he had a safe space to return to.

These are just a few of the people I have met this week, people who have made a chapel a bit more into a home, not just for themselves, but for me, and ultimately for God. By gathering together, by talking about nothing and everything, we’re doing something so holy. And I know you all know that too, because it’s exactly what you do each Sunday when you gather here.

You’re taking the sting out of exiling East of Eden. You’re going to some place you might want to close your eyes and imagine, some place that feels like home. And in doing so, you are reminding yourselves and everyone around you of the inherent goodness of creation, the incredible worthiness of life. By being together, we are doing the work of making all things new, ushering forth the day when God might come home and dwell among us, bringing to fruition the Christian hope that there will be no more tears, no more violence, no more mourning and crying and pain, perhaps not universally, but particularly. Here, where we are planted. In Santa Cruz county, through something so simple as coffee and conversation.

Amen.

Blessing:

As we go into the rest of our days, coffee hour, a potluck, an important meeting, may we hear this promise found in the book of Revelation:

The Lord says, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

Maybe I’m biased, but I often find that water of life is caffeinated and creamy. But whatever your thirst is, whatever satisfies it, may you know that you are loved, that you are holy, no matter who you are or what you have done, and may you not only take a sip from that spring of water of life, but share the cup.

In the name of the father, son and holy spirit, go in peace.