

Where Justice Gets Done, Places Matter
Isaiah 40:1-11
The Second Sunday in Advent
December 8, 2019
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

9 Glendale Avenue, Whitesboro, NY. ... Moody Beach, Moody, Maine..... A little green and blue tent, anywhere.... what do these places all have in common? They are places that are “home” for me. Where is “home” for you? As I thought about this question this week, I was aware that on the first anniversary of moving into my “new place” in Collegeville, that 119 Revere Court, my current address, was not on my list. That’s a work in progress; it’s one thing to move physically, another to relocate your emotional center. And that’s at least a part of what “home” does for us; it provides us an emotional center. It also is a space that welcomes us, that invites us to be our true selves, to let down and let go, to take off our shoes and anything else—our façade, our “good behavior”, our pretenses, and to be our genuine and true selves. Again, where is “home” for you?

Places matter to us, for some as much, or more, than people. Places locate us in time and space, they provided context and grounding, they call to mind emotions, events, opportunities. You doubt remember *where* you were when major historical or life events happened. Places and spaces root us in experiences of ourselves, one another and God.

We are considering, this Advent season, what the world looks like, what *we* and our ministry together looks, like when justice gets done. When God comes to live among us, in us, thru us, when the reign of God *is* at hand, justice comes! What’s important then?

Last week we talked about the importance of words; words matter when justice is done. Words of inclusion, words of welcome, words of comfort, peace, invitation, hope. Words

communicate God's presence and power among us, bringing the need for justice and the work of justice to light. But words are not enough; when justice gets done, places matter too.

This very familiar text from the prophet Isaiah is a regular reading of the Advent season. It's the beginning of what is known as Second Isaiah, a point in this compiled text that turns from the words of doom and punishment doled out to unfaithful people to words that give hope and promise of a day when justice *will* come! These are words of strength and restoration; God's wrath is over; the debt paid. And so, this prophet's voice picks up the call to look ahead with anticipation with images of the return from exile to homeland, with a picture of a reimagined Jerusalem, with the personification of a place will reunite the people who, scattered and forsaken, will experience "home" again.

It begins with a double call of "Comfort!" If *that* doesn't convey a sense of home, I don't know what does. A place of protection and safety, of compassion and rest. This is *God's* voice, calling to those who have been scattered and without a place. The word here is that it's over: the destruction, the separation, the punishment. It's all over. It's a line in the sand; a clean slate. It's a "Let's start again" moment. Notice that "Jerusalem" is personified; the prophet talks as if this place is a person! We know what that sense of a place is, don't we? You might feel that way about the house you currently live in or a previous one. You might experience that here, in this place: a sense of character and connectedness with this space, for some of you the place of your baptism or marriage; for some of you the "last" place you thought you might encounter God or the place which celebrated new life with you, and comforted you in deep grief. Places become "personal" to us: spaces can hold and welcome us as dear as a friend, as intimate as a lover. We "know" them, and they seem to know us. Places we call "home" satisfy a longing and

a need for each of us—they root us in ourselves. They launch us into the world and reclaim us again when we return. Isn't it interesting that Jerusalem is such a place: not only for *these* returning Hebrews but even today, for Jews, for Christians, and for Muslims. *All* the Abrahamic faith traditions find their physical "home" in the same place. What might that say to all of us? About us? About God? About what might be possible "where justice gets done?"

The text goes on to promise Jerusalem that "her warfare is ended"; that rest, recovery, peace is at hand. She has "paid her debt." God forgives! She requires that one speaks to her "tenderly"; she is fragile, weary, worn and in need of care.

And then the image of place changes: to a way in the desert, reminiscent of the path the Hebrew people journeyed for more than 400 years seeking the Promised Land. But notice this: this is not just a "path"; it's a "highway"; it's smooth and straight, broad and inviting; no twists and turns, no mountains to traverse, no blind spots to endure. The way to this place, to Jerusalem, "home", is clear and unobstructed! All are welcome; the travel is easy.

Where justice gets done, the very landscape will be transformed! Obstacles will be removed; barriers torn down. It doesn't seem possible: have you ever been in a desert? Seemingly endless stretches of dry, uninhabitable land. Mountains are too big to move; rocky places too many to clear. This seems unrealistic, a fantasy, not a vision. And yet the call is clear: make the way, prepare the place, *now*! The herald is encouraged to go to a high place so all can see and hear this good news: God is coming with strength and with justice, with compassion and with tenderness. This is the *place* where it's all going to happen, where justice comes.

What does it mean for us and for the places *we* find ourselves in? How can *we* hear the prophets' words for *our* place: for this building, for this neighborhood, this city, and beyond? How can *this* be a place become a home for justice: a place where people feel welcomed and safe, a place where silenced voices are heard, where marginalized people have center stage, where children are nurtured and encouraged to dream their wildest dreams, where weary adults find strength, where grief is held tenderly and compassion is the norm?

My friends, *we* are the ones called to make way for justice; to level the playing fields, to remove the obstacles, to widen the path and make it a highway, to offer the tender care of a loving shepherd to people who have been exiled and deserve to return "home." We are the ones who, in the coming of Jesus, not only know and experience this sense of homecoming but are empowered and expected to create it in the places we inhabit for the benefit of others who have been left out. What better place than this beautiful place to do that? What better time than now to welcome everyone home?

In this Advent season, when we are so aware of "home" and it's meaning for us, let us remember the ones who are without a home: those who literally live on the streets but also those who have been exiled from their faith and family because of their sexual orientation, those who have been marginalized by their skin color or the language they speak. In this season of Advent let us begin to consider how we might make a home, for immigrants who have left the homes they love or places they feared for a new place of safety and relief. In this Advent season, let *this place* speak to your heart about what we might envision here: about how we can represent God's presence here beyond stained glass and wood.

Justice gets done when those at the edges are drawn to the center; when those who cannot speak are heard. Justice gets done when everyone has a place that they can call “home”, where they experience the welcoming, nurturing love and care of others and of God.

Where justice gets done, places matter. May this become a place that matters to this community. May this become a place that gives justice a home.