

The Sparrow, Too  
Sermon, August 26, 2018  
Rev. Anita Peebles

There is a special family who lived at one time in my college church. Peace Community Church, an American Baptist and Alliance of Baptist-affiliated collection of activists, dissidents, loving friends and hospitable peacemakers, meets within an old building. The stairs sag and creak. The plaster on the bathroom ceilings is falling down. The carpets in the fellowship hall are stained. The pipes in the kitchen have burst so many times during the Ohio winter that you can only get a trickle of water through there anymore. The stained-glass windows are faded and show spider-vein cracks. And there is a family of bats in the balcony.

This kind of sounds like the children's books that begin, "If you give a mouse a cookie..." or "if you give a moose a muffin..." Mine would go, "If you put a bat in the balcony..." To be sure, chaos ensues.

But these bats didn't really disturb much, honestly. They frightened the aged Sunday school teacher as she took the children to their class one morning (they wound up having Sunday school in the fellowship hall that day). They flapped around during an advent organ concert. They caused my dear pastor Steve to get more exercise than he bargained for as he attempted to shoo them out.

Maybe these bats came to hear the Word, just like you and I are here today! To be sure, these church bats lived in the house of God, and found happiness, even if only for a short while. These bats had found a home in our church, much like the sparrow who nests beside the altar of God, albeit a little bit more sinister.

Psalms 84 reminds us that God is a particular God, caring about even where individual sparrows nest and preparing a place for the sparrow to hatch her eggs near the altar of the Lord. The sparrow, too, can nest in God's house.

Now, I think of sparrows as pretty standard animals. I see a lot of them in cities and lighting on houses and I don't really think about them a lot. But sparrows have been through a lot, as a species! When I was using that good ole' sermon prep tool called "Google," I ran across a story about the Four Pests Campaign in China. Mao Zedong and other leaders at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward in the late **1950s** encouraged citizens to exterminate all sparrows, which were seen as enemies of progress because they would feed on the farm

fields and decrease production. They were even called “public animals of capitalism” because they would take more than their share of the harvest. Citizens would bang pots and pans out in the street to discourage the birds from landing; this was so successful that many birds just fell from the sky out of exhaustion. Sparrow nests were destroyed, eggs crushed, young drowned and flying sparrows just simply shot down from the sky. Rewards were given for the largest number of sparrows killed. This mass extermination of sparrows resulted in severe ecological imbalance when the sparrows were no longer there to be predators for various insects. Locust populations bloomed in echoes of Exodus imagery. Extreme imbalance plagued the Chinese ecosystem, altering the homes and livelihoods of millions of people.

And though this country may not have the same drastic story about extermination of sparrows, we do have records of raids against rats, the Colorado potato beetle, mosquitoes, emerald ash borer, bed bugs and other “undesirables” prone to be in our cities and under our feet...and in our homes. And so, knowing a little about this history of pest extermination in the United States and mourning the loss of so many sparrows in China, the irony was not lost on me this week as I had my own adventure with my own little “undesirable.” An eight-legged one. A multi-eyed one. And as surely as I’ve spent this week preparing a sermon on the psalm that begins so lyrically, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O God of heavenly forces!” I spent half an hour trying to get up the courage to swat a too-large arachnid that decided to traipse across my bathroom floor while I was brushing my teeth Thursday night.

This led me to go down another Google rabbit hole about Giant House Spiders, which, as you Seattle-ites know very well and seem to have left out of this job description, are a thing here.

So lest you think I only preach about snakes, crows and spiders, let’s consider with hospitality the presence of these sometimes-unwanted and less-than-loved local critters that find their homes in the rafters and tall trees and crawl spaces and floorboards. Are these un-legged and too-many-legged and winged creatures less important to God than the precious sparrows which nest nearby the altar of the Holy? Are these creepy-crawlies and squawking scavengers to be devoid of house and home? God created these animals and insects, our neighbors, to be at home in this world just as much as we are created to be at home in this world.

Our Scripture today, Psalm 84, was probably composed to mark a pilgrimage to the holy temple in Jerusalem. “How lovely is the dwelling place of

the Most High God, the Lord of heavenly forces!” the pilgrims sang as they traveled towards the geographical center of their faith, their home away from home. This was in a time when people all over ancient Mesopotamia made sense of the world through worshipping a diverse pantheon of gods and goddesses. Each god had their own particular gifts and abilities, and each god had a house. Different temples were constructed to worship different deities. The temple in Jerusalem was where the Israelites went to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who liberated them from their oppression under Egyptian rule, the God of David and his son Solomon, who saw fit to construct a temple, a beautiful home for God to dwell. God would no more wander with the Israelites, contained in the ark of the covenant, moving from place to place as the twelve tribes of Israel and their descendants traversed the ancient land. In the temple Solomon built, the Ark of the Covenant would live in the Holy of Holies, the most holy space, where Godself dwells. When the Ark of the Covenant was placed into the holiest room in the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem temple, Solomon said, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”

So, in other words, God lives here but God can also get around and walk about a little bit? And if this sounds a little weird, that the God of the cosmos could be made so small to dwell in this one particular building in this one particular place, hear the words of our gathering hymn: “Not just in buildings, small and confining, not in some heaven, lightyears away. Here in this place the new light is shining, now is God present and now is the day.” This hymn calls to us to consider the particularity of God. The Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of the whole entire universe, enthroned in the heavens, breathing the breath of life into every single creature that slithers, crawls, walks and flies, giving each bird its song, giving each rose its color, making the dry valleys flow strong with fresh water...that Creator also chooses to dwell in a particular place. For the Israelite people, that was the Ark of the Covenant and then the temple in Jerusalem.

This cultural backdrop is what the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem were thinking about. God has a house, a literal, physical house where we can go visit God. A place on the map. A true home away from home. In a way, that sounds really nice: “Here’s a place I can go visit that will always be here, where God will always be found. It’s God’s home and I am welcome here.”

What does it mean to find a home in God’s temple? Think of this sparrow, who felt comfortable enough to nest in the temple, near the altar, perhaps near the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies, despite all the hustle and bustle of

temple priests and pilgrims paying tribute to the Most High God, and the organists warming up for Sunday worship and people greeting each other and people setting out cups for coffee hour. The temple of God, or the church of God, is often a really busy place! And yet we read that the sparrow finds enough comfort to build her nest, to lay her eggs, to prepare for the next generation. That kind of comfort is so needed in this world where we exterminate pests and alter habitats for drilling oil and natural gas, where people are plagued with wildfires that threaten their homes and livelihoods. To have a place where God is certain to be found, even as the natural world is changing and as the Israelite pilgrims remembered their time in exile. That certainty and that feeling of at-home-ness, provided the inspiration for this beautiful song of praise to God.

But confining God to one location is also incredibly limiting. Because homes change. People beat pots and pans to stop sparrows from landing and making nests; we use brooms and heavy books and whatever sandals are nearby to squish any so-called “intruding” bugs; people lose their homes due to poor decisions, unfair management, natural disasters and rapidly shifting markets. Homes change. The fires the past couple weeks have been reminders of this fact.

In December of 2008 my grandparents’ house burned down to the ground. Thankfully, my grandparents were not at home at the time, only returning from their bowling league when someone told them that a house on West Fort Street was on fire. It was their home, and they found themselves at 80 years old, homeless. Some faulty wiring in their attic caught fire and burned their home of 55 years to the foundations, leaving a few items burned or damaged by smoke. The family Bible was unable to be recovered. The bluebell china, one of the only valuable heirlooms, was all cracked, so grandma wasn’t able to give it to me like she had promised, a gift passed down to the women of our family. Family photos that were able to be recovered still smell of smoke to this day. My grandpa wasn’t able to be buried this past spring with the flag he received when he was discharged from the army after the Korean War.

Though it was my grandparents who were faced with having to find a new home and rebuild their lives literally from the ground up, my whole family shared the experience of not being able to return home. The basement where we shared many Thanksgiving pies over the years, the living room where my cousins introduced me to Star Wars (the original trilogy, of course) and the bedroom where I slept when I was sure I saw Rudolf’s nose zipping by one snowy Christmas Eve, all gone. The building that had been converted from a one-room Nazarene

church to a home for my grandparents, four children and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren was gone, the walls and carpet and windows and doors and items held within all gone. In the days that followed we had to re-learn and re-create what home meant to my family. We could never go home again. We had to learn how to be home without a building.

That white-hot truth is facing so many people in California, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia, as the fires burn through the Pacific Northwest landscape, sending smoke and some ash even as far as to cover my Prius in my driveway here in the city. That prickly truth also impacts countless flora and fauna residents of this bioregion. And yes, as forestry officials remind us, fire is not always destructive in negative and desecrating ways that steal homes and memories and lives. Sometimes it can be constructive, as certain trees need fire in order to reproduce, in order for their seedpods and cones to open up and reveal the seeds of the next generation. But the fires make our temperatures and emotions rise uncontrollably, and the smoke makes it hard to see and breathe. We can't see familiar landmarks in front of us, we can't discern where we should go. The fire and smoke obscures how we see our home. The fire and smoke disrupt our daily lives, perhaps enough to be frustrated and cough more. Perhaps enough to wonder why this is the new normal for our bioregion. Perhaps enough to wonder how unhoused people in our city can make a home in this "new normal."

I recently learned about an app called "Find It, Fix It," which purports to "report selected issues" to the City of Seattle. Apparently on this app (are you familiar with it?) you can report a pothole, a broken-down car, a malfunctioning parking meter and anything else you find that fits the list of undesirable things in our city, near our homes. Did you know that there are some people in our city who make the list of "undesirables"? I bet you know who they are. In a recent Atlantic article, a journalist interviewed neighbors in Seattle who reported unhoused people sleeping in public areas to the City government using this "find it, fix it" app. Find IT, fix IT. How dehumanizing, to refer to another being made in the image of God as an "IT." People are not to be found and fixed, they are to be embraced and enfolded and held. They are to be seen and heard and understood as precious vessels of the breath and creativity of God. They are to be treated with dignity and hospitality, to be shown compassion that soothes dry valleys with springs of living water. If the sparrow, and the snake and the crow and the

spider are welcome to nest near the altar of the Holy One, how much more are human beings welcomed?

The writer of this psalm said “one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere!” That is how good, how right, how true it felt to be even reaching the doorstep to the temple of God. How much safety, comfort, and hospitality touched even the courtyard of God’s house. But let’s go beyond this courtyard as we seek to welcome all people so that they might find home near the dwelling place of God. The incredible musicians of Sweet Honey in the Rock share these words in one of their songs,

“There were no mirrors in my Nana's house,  
no mirrors in my Nana's house.  
There were no mirrors in my Nana's house,  
no mirrors in my Nana's house.  
And the beauty that I saw in everything  
was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun).

I never knew that my skin was too black.  
I never knew that my nose was too flat.  
I never knew that my clothes didn't fit.  
I never knew there were things that I'd missed,  
cause the beauty in everything  
was in her eyes (like the rising of the sun);  
...was in her eyes.”

Perhaps the pilgrims reaching the outer courtyard of God, being just-this-close to God’s dwelling place among the people, felt this way. “The beauty of everything was in her eyes,” and that’s what it felt like to be home. And the composer of Psalm 84 knew some of this feeling too, knew that the Holy One was not only to be found in “buildings confining” and “not in some heaven lightyears away.” The psalmist also met God along the path to the temple, along the highways and byways, on the journey. As they passed through the dry valley of Baca, supposedly a deeply barren place, the psalmist writes that springs of fresh water flourish in the deserted place. The psalmist saw the beauty in everything, never knowing that the valley was dry, never believing that water could never be found there again. This transformative view of that which is dry being made fertile again spoke to the psalmist of God’s presence with the pilgrims, of God’s presence with the parched land. Perhaps Nana’s house, for Sweet Honey in the

Rock, speaks of God's house. No mirrors were present to enlarge the pieces of ourselves that society tells us are undesirable. No mirrors to make us question our belonging, our beauty, our worth. *Perhaps we also can see the beauty in everything as we consider what it means to make home, what it means to feel home near the altars of the Lord while understanding the Holy One as a dynamic, transformative Living God at work out and about in the world.* As one of my friends shared on a recent episode of the Theosophia podcast, "why would God create this big beautiful world if God didn't want us to find God there?"

Our God is both a God of all-encompassing love, justice and mercy, as well as a God who chooses to particularly dwell with particular people. This God is specific. This God calls our names. This God knows what we look like and what our favorite foods are and what fears we hold close to our hearts and where to find us when we have turned away from love. This God is dynamic, transformative, creative and redemptive. This God is not only found in buildings that are dark and confining, not only in some eschatological hope of future peace and prosperity in heaven, this God was alongside the pilgrims on the journey, transforming the dry valley externally as well as their internal dry valleys. The pilgrims found God in the temple in Jerusalem, but they also found God along their journey. I imagine that all of the pilgrims found ways to find the dwelling place of God within their own hearts.

And so wherever we are, let's make a home, and let us do it together. Let's make a home where we can sing the songs of our faith with gusto, where we can raise our children together in safety and wisdom. Let's make a home with no mirrors, where we don't seek external signs of our internal worth but we see it reflected in each other's eyes and in each other's actions and in each other's lives. Whether you dwell now in the place where your parents and grandparents lived and loved and worshipped; whether you are far away from those you love most in the world, geographically or emotionally; whether you have spiders in your sinks and bats in your balcony and crows sitting on your car; whether you have been separated by the veil of death from those who remind you who you are; let us remind each other: *you* are where God dwells. *We* are where God dwells.

"There are no mirrors in God's house, no mirrors in God's house. The beauty I saw in everything, the beauty in everything, was in God's eyes."

May it ever be so.