

Houses and Thresholds

John 14:1-4

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Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In God's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."

John 14:1-4

House. Being at home. Finding our way home by another way. These words keep rising up for me this week. I think there are a few reasons the Spirit has invited me to pay attention.

My brother Jim died suddenly on Monday. He had had some recent health issues. When he tested positive for the Covid 19 virus, his health started rapidly declining. It was such a shock when my nephew texted me on Monday morning that Jim was in the hospital and might not survive. He died a couple hours later. So this week the waves of grief about losing Jim have rolled over me, making me feel teary and distracted. I find myself thinking about the house we lived in Santa Ana. A house where my two sisters Kathie and Pam, brother Jim, my parents and I ate and talked and laughed and played and prayed and loved. That house shaped our family life from 1962 – 1985.

I thought about the houses in California where Jim lived and where I spent time with him, his wife and his son, my nephew – houses in Costa Mesa, Aptos, Watsonville, Chilcoot north of Reno, Santa Paula, Ventura. I thought about the lake house on Newman Lake in Washington state where we spent time with my Stewart cousins in the summers. I thought about the houses where my Cochran cousins lived in Los Angeles and where we spent almost every holiday. I was hoping Jim was going to come visit us in our house in Novato. It was not to be.

Houses, homes, places we live and gather, places that shape us and are connected to memories of people we love. In God's house there are many rooms. Christ prepares a place for us.

The two Houses of Congress. I have not uttered or read that phrase more times than I did on Wednesday. The Houses of Congress were invaded by a mob of white people determined to use violence to prevent peaceful debate and peaceful transfers of power. The House of Representatives and the Senate - the two houses of Congress have equal but unique roles in the federal government. To see thugs running through the halls, destroying property, wandering around the chambers was horrifying. The storming of the Capitol was based on a

lie, fed by myth, and culminated in violence, in vandalism, and in the desecration of the people's house. Those houses are for civil debate. Those houses are where democracy works. We will continue to learn more about what happened that day. For now I will recommit to standing against such violence in that house and do what I can to renounce actions that reflect hate and white supremacy. As a person of faith, I pray for God's guidance to show me in my life and ministry to seek truth and justice. And just as the Magi chose to resist the violent orders of Herod, may we as people of faith come home by another way—the way of peace.

House. Being at home. Coming through a door into our homes.

As we begin a new year, I am thinking about a spiritual practice I introduced at the church I served in New Jersey – Chalking the Doorway. It is an old practice to mark the new year and Epiphany (12 days after Christmas) also known as Three Kings Day, Jan. 6. I first learned about the Chalking of the Door, the Threshold, while I served as an intern at Noe Valley Ministry in San Francisco.

I am not quite sure of the origin of the custom. It seems to come from Germany and Great Britain. At Willow Grove Presbyterian Church, we chucked the door to the sanctuary. We prayed to God for all the people who would come through the doors in the coming year. And then at end of the service, each household received chalk and a blessing prayer.

God of doors and homes, bless this home this year and every year.

Bless all who come and go through this door, both those who live here and those who visit.

On the lintel or above the door write in chalk the current year

The years and the initials of the legendary names of the 3 wisemen –

C Caspar, M Melchior, B and Balthasar followed the star

20 + C + M + B + 21

What thresholds are we crossing as individuals, as a church, a country, a planet?

What doors are you closing in the new year?

What doors are you opening?

And what does it mean to be traveling home? Spiritual homes?

Are there new roads back home?

I was struck by the importance of the words “home” and “house” in the Bible. The word for “house” appears 1,437 times in the Bible. 37 times in the book of Psalms alone.

Maybe this is a clue that we need to pay attention to where is our home, where we feel at home, how we build a spiritual life. To pay attention to home in ways that hold us, comfort us, allow us to be.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. In God’s house there are many rooms.” In the King James version it reads, “In my Father's house, there are many rooms.” More closely translated, “there are many dwelling places.”

Jesus offers these words to his disciples in his farewell speech. He knows he will soon be facing his own death. There’s a hint that Jesus’ words weren’t meant to offer physical security. The promised “dwelling places” (*monai* in Greek) are linked grammatically to the Johannine concept of “abiding” (*meno*). The dwelling places are the noun form of the verb that Jesus uses just a chapter later, when he tells the disciples, “Abide in me.” The invitation to abide and dwell with God strikes me as an invitation to hear a comforting word—not from a place of security or power, but from a place of vulnerability. To admit that we cannot control the things that trouble us and to seek comfort.

So a room in God’s house means abiding in the Holy One, in the midst of grief, in the midst of loss, in the midst of fear, in the midst of loving each other & all creation and being loved.

House. Going home. Walking through thresholds as we move into a new year.

I want to close with a piece by one of my favorite writers. Jan Richardson wrote a piece a few years ago on her blog in January. She wrote about chalking the doors and then offered a blessing that spoke deeply to me.

At the same time that I’m thinking of and praying for a physical dwelling that we will inhabit and bless, I also find myself imagining the coming year as a house—a space in time that is opening itself to all of us.

How will we inhabit the coming year?

How will we enter it with mindfulness and with intention?

How will we move through the rooms of the coming months in a way that brings blessing to this world?

With these questions in mind, I offer this blessing for you.

The Year as a House: A Blessing

Think of the year
as a house:
door flung wide
in welcome,
threshold swept
and waiting,
a graced spaciousness

opening and offering itself
to you.

Let it be blessed
in every room.
Let it be hallowed
in every corner.
Let every nook
be a refuge
and every object
set to holy use.

Let it be here
that safety will rest.
Let it be here
that health will make its home.
Let it be here
that peace will show its face.
Let it be here
that love will find its way.

Here
let the weary come
let the aching come
let the lost come
let the sorrowing come.

Here
let them find their rest
and let them find their soothing
and let them find their place
and let them find their delight.

And may it be
in this house of a year
that the seasons will spin in beauty,
and may it be
in these turning days
that time will spiral with joy.
And may it be
that its rooms will fill
with ordinary grace

and light spill from every window
to welcome the stranger home.

As we enter this new year, you may be in the midst of grief, sadness, anger, fear, uncertainty.

May you remember there is a place, a room for you
where you abide in Holy Love and Mystery.

There are doorways and thresholds to cross into hope.

Wherever you make your home,
may it be blessed,
and may you enter this Epiphany
and the coming year in peace. Amen.

Source of "The Year as a House: A Blessing"

Jan Richardson, "Feast of Epiphany: Blessing the House," The Painted Prayerbook, 12.31.09
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2009/12/31/epiphany-blessing-the-house/>