

Reflection on the Word – August 19, 2018
1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; John 4:4-10,
19-24

"Come on over. I want to tell you a story." Almost always, when my sisters and I would visit my Mother's Aunt Nellie, those were words that would greet us shortly after we walked through the door. And she'd follow it up by saying, "I need you to know where you come from." Through Aunt Nellie, we became acquainted with all kinds of family members who had lived before us and learned parts of our family history that we would otherwise never have known.

Today, we celebrate the Scottish connection which is part of many of your family stories and is certainly part of the story of the history of the Miramichi. And, as we do each Sunday when we gather for worship, we also celebrate and remember the story of faith that connected our ancestors and continues to connect us, as part of the family of God.

We are reminded that long, long ago, Jewish pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem, to the temple, that special place of prayer for all who were children of Israel. As they walked and talked, they also sang: "Happy are those who live in God's love; they find a home in God's care."

They find a home. What does that word conjure up for you? What feelings do you associate with home? Warmth, safety, familiarity, comfort, love, acceptance, belonging?

We've often heard it said, "There's no place like home." They were words uttered by Dorothy, in the Wizard of Oz, as she clicked the heels of her ruby red slippers and wished herself back to Kansas. I've said it when I come back from a vacation where I've been traveling for a week or two. There's no sweeter sight, coming up Highway 11 late at night, than seeing the lights of the service station at the head of the North Napan Road! Almost home! Whether it's a farm house on the plains of Kansas or along a Napan side road; a heritage house on Wellington Street; a cozy cottage with a view of the river, a duplex at Retirement Miramichi, or an inspiring place of worship – there is *no place* like *home*.

Of course, in all of our lives, we will face moments when we must leave the place we call home, never to return again. A new job means the whole family has to re-locate; a house becomes too big to manage and there is downsizing into an apartment; illness necessitates that a special care residence becomes the place you will call home; and perhaps it becomes necessary to make a move from the city, the country, and even the church which has been part of your family life for generations.

Today our thoughts go back to a time when Scottish ancestors who knew the challenge of making a "home" in a new land, settled in this area of the

Miramichi and put down roots in what would become home to their offspring for generations to come. We think of William Davidson and John Cort, two entrepreneurial Scots who made application to the British Crown for a grant of land at Wilson's Point, and how the Miramichi area became a center of lucrative fishing, lumbering and shipbuilding operations.

We recall how, as more and more settlers arrived, and the businesses began to grow and flourish, there also arose a desire to meet the spiritual needs of the people. So it was, that St. James Presbyterian church was built, the first Protestant church to serve the Miramichi. It seems that a church in a community made a powerful statement about a divine presence in which people not only believed, but upon which they depended, to help them cope with the harsh physical conditions and strains of pioneer life.

In today's scripture we are reminded that on every journey we undertake, and through all the changes life brings, we are always at home with God. Wherever we are, God is there. God's home was found both in the journey which the pilgrims made on their way to Jerusalem and in the destination...the temple itself. And later, when the temple was destroyed, and the people found themselves exiled in a foreign land, still God was there. You see, whenever we think God is absent, whenever we fear God is not there, then likely it has more to do with us, than God.

Do you know the story about the couple who had two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous? Those two boys were always getting into trouble and their parents could be assured that if any mischief occurred in their town their two young sons were in some way involved.

The parents were at their wits end as to what to do about their sons' behavior. The mother had heard that a preacher in a nearby church had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so she asked her husband if he thought they should send the boys to speak with him.

The husband said, 'We might as well. We need to do something before I really lose my temper!' The preacher agreed to speak with the boys, but asked to see them individually. The 8 year old went to meet with him first. The preacher sat the boy down and asked him, 'Where is God?'

The boy made no response, so the preacher repeated the question sternly, 'Where is God?' Again the boy made no attempt to answer. So, raising his voice, and shaking his finger in the boy's face, the preacher asked once more, 'WHERE IS GOD?'

And with that, the boy bolted from the room and ran directly home, and straight to his bedroom, where he shut himself in the closet. His slightly older brother, seeing him go, followed him into the closet and asked what had happened. The younger boy replied, 'We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing and they think we did it.'

Friends, God is never missing. God is One who keeps his covenant and blesses his people with mercy & grace, and with his presence. And going to God's house should always be like going home. The Psalmist seemed to know this. Psalm 84, one of the songs of Zion, was a song that people sang as they made the trek up the mount to the temple in Jerusalem. "Happy are those who dwell in your house, O God, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you."

For the people of Israel, the Temple was the holy dwelling place of God. And for those who worshipped the one true God, the God of Abraham & Sarah and Moses, it was home. As the Psalmist says of the temple – God makes room for all to find a place, to find sanctuary. He compares it to a bird, a sparrow, finding a nest by the altars of God. The holiest of places gives welcome and room for even the smallest of creatures. And surely, in the temple, as in other holy places, we too can find room and a sense of home.

Home is *wherever* we find ourselves with God ... and that means God is not limited to a temple in Jerusalem or a church in Miramichi. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman - "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... a time when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth."

That's what Solomon, in his wisdom, had discovered – that God cannot be contained in temples and churches. God is both with us and within us – Christ living in our hearts, the Holy Spirit active in the world and dwelling deep inside us, moving us to actions of love, compassion, forgiveness, peace, service ... making each of us a temple of God.

Put a group of people without love and compassion in their hearts into a church building, and all you've got is a building. It takes the spirit of love to make it a church! And when we come to that place in our lives where we realize that ... when we come to the place where we experience the loving presence of the living God in us and with us, it is like coming home.

There's a story I've told before - but I'll tell it again. It was a snowy morning in January and the minister did not expect a large congregation. Least of all did he expect that Mrs. Brown, a woman in her 80's who suffered with debilitating arthritis, would be there. But she was.

"However did you manage to make the journey to church on a day like this?" asked the minister as he welcomed her. "Ah, well," she answered brightly, "my heart got here first. And after that, it was easy for the rest of me!"

My heart got here first – Mrs. Brown was one who knew that living in a healthy, loving, grace-filled relationship with God was dependent on her regular participation in worship ... and she could say, with the Psalmist, "My soul longs, even faints for the courts of God; my heart and my flesh cry out for joy to the living God."

Why do we come to worship? Is it habit? Is it because we are coerced by someone else to come? Is it only a special occasion like this Celebration of the Scots that brings us?

Or has your heart brought you here because you know how important it is to your daily living to find renewal and refreshment, in community, with others of the people of God, as together we join in offering our praise and thanksgiving and take with us a word of hope and encouragement for the week ahead?

Our Scottish heritage includes a strong tradition of gathering to worship God. Through worship and preaching, the people were given the reassurance that God was with them, especially through the hard and lonely times. God is with us still, and will be, for generations to come. On that promise, we can stand. Thanks be to God! Amen.