

Dear sisters and brothers,

„there’s no place like home“ is the conclusion of one of my favorite children’s books called the wizard of Oz. It tells about a girl who dreams about a place somewhere over the rainbow and travels to that place in order to realize that there’s no place like home.

Dorothy, the girl in the book, has lived in this home her whole life. She was born there. She grew up there. She knows every tree and every bush there. She is surrounded by her family and her friends and she speaks the language of this area. For her „home“ is this little house in the fields of Kansas. But not everybody has a place that he or she can call home.

What about you?

Which place would call „home“?

Many of you have surely moved house many times and are living at a place far from the country you have come from. You have maybe left friends and family members behind and are facing a different culture, a different language and life different from that familiar to you. In other words the flat you are living it at the moment may or may not be the place that your heart calls „home“.

„Home“ for me is a place where I am safe and cozy. It’s a place that gives me warmth and where people are waiting for me, expecting me to come home soon. It’s a place where I can be myself and share my thoughts, my sorrow and my joy with those present. Home is a shelter to which I can go at the end of the day where I find everything that I need for life: a cup of tea, a bowl of soup, a place to rest and love coming from friends and family members joining me.

To be honest, the place I lived in wasn’t home to me for the longest time. Maybe you know the feeling of coming home to a dark, lonely place that is not the house you would chose to live in nor the town or country you would have chosen to be in. Sometimes a trip to IKEA and some colorful furniture help to make a strange place a substitute to home but often it can’t push away the thought that something is missing. That life is just not as joyful and secure as it could be. In some phases of our lives we are „homeless“ in a way searching for this warm and cozy place that is familiar and inviting. Searching... longing... hoping. Just like Dorothy in the beginning of her story.

But we as Christians know that we needn’t cross the rainbow to find the place we are dreaming of. God offers us a home where we can come to rest at any time in any place.

“How lovely is your dwelling place O LORD of hosts!” This is how psalm 84 begins. This line leads us right to our desire to find a place in which we can live and feel at home. God invites us to live with him. But how can we imagine the “dwelling place” that he offers us as a host?

“Lovely” the psalm suggests.

But what makes it so lovely? Do you live a carefree life there? Is it a hiding place or more like a pillow that you lay your exhausted head on after a hard day.

“Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,

where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.”

Being at home with God means flying free as a swallow and yet building a nest. God is the fresh air surrounding the sparrow and the tree that serves as a resting place for the bird's nest. It's the place where we bring our young ones when we want them to be safe. A place in which we find everything that we need to live no matter where we are, how much money we have and how hard the day is that lies before us.

If we read on we find that it's a place where we can sing, be joyful, find strength in God and in each other. It's a place where our prayers are heard, our joys and sorrow can be shared and we find a shelter from the outside world for just a moment.

In a nutshell: “the LORD God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.”

Here the psalm ends and leaves us with our own images of God's dwelling place. On these cold and lonely days I had a few of those images. When I was young for me the house of God was in heaven or the garden of Eden. Then I grew older and saw more of the world and imagined that I could meet God in the beautiful vulcano landscape, blooming gardens and deep oceans I saw on my way. I have felt at home with God in many places of the world just because they were utterly beautiful and peaceful.

Wouldn't it be convenient if we could just book a ticket to these places? An all-inclusive stay at God's ultimate dream resort? One-way... with no option to ever return? How wonderful would it be at times if we could pack our belongings together and leave our flats and houses behind to begin our life in God's dwelling place.

I'm afraid it's not that easy. Yes, God invites us to be with him and find him at any given place. We can do it. Anytime. Yet it is up to us to fill this place with life and love... To design places in which we can meet him and come together to worship him. It is up to us to seek these places and make them ours. God is the host but we need to decide to live with him and accept the lifestyle that he dreams of for his people.

Men and women in all centuries have had the desire to create places in which we can come together to meet God. I'm thinking of churches laid out with marble and gold like the St. Peter's Dome I visited during my stay in Rome. But also chapels in the middle of nowhere, barns in the countryside serving as worship areas, stones on places that seem holy to somebody and the temple in Jerusalem which was the first holy building that Solomon erected.

Let us remember the Old Testament Reading from the book of Kings that we heard some moments ago.

It tells us of one the greatest days in the life of Solomon: The day on which he could dedicate the temple that was built under his reign. His father, David, had already had the wish to build a house for God but hadn't accomplished it. It was Solomon's achievement that he was now addressing God's people in this beautiful temple.

I wonder what their first thought was, when seeing it for the first time...

Were they impressed by the careful construction of the building? Was it the noble building material and the gold that caught their attention? Or were they simply thrilled to have this one magnificent place serving as a „house of God“ where they could all meet and pray together?

No doubt the gold and the carvings must have impressed them but in their hearts they had always looked for a place in which they could find asylum... to pray, to thank God and bring sacrifice, to rest, to meet, to reconcile with God and each other, to think, to live and to love. Solomon expresses the deepest wish of his people to have a place towards which God „opens his eyes day and night“. He pleads God to hear the prayers of his people- to forgive them and help them when they are in need.

So for Solomon this first Temple is not merely a beautiful building or a holy place in which a holy document of the covenant with God is kept. No. It is „the“ meeting point. A place of remembering the grace and fullness that comes from God and living a life with God as its centerpiece. Solomon’s prayer makes this ever so clear:

**„O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart“**

**“How lovely is your dwelling place O LORD of hosts!”** Salomon might have thought when he left the temple on that day. And with him many believers. But it isn’t the gold that makes this place so special. It’s the hard work that was done to erect it, the hopes and faith in God that lead to the construction, the life that took place there and the phases of destruction which lay ahead of it which make it a holy place. A place in which God really invited and met his people.

Many years have passed since Solomon dedicated the temple and gave his people a place of asylum. The problems and needs of those time were different than they are today. Yet we have in common that people at all times needed places that were good and secure. Being Christian has always meant finding a home in God’s kingdom.

Have you found such a home? Where are the places in which you can meet God? What do you expect from such places? What do you do to make the house of God just a little more beautiful, warm and cozy?

Obviously for me Peace Church is a dwelling place of God. When I enter church on a Sunday morning I feel like Dorothy coming home after some time away. I am greeted by Johnbull’s friendly smile,  
I see familiar faces,  
I enjoy chatting and laughing with friends and strangers,  
I check the bulletin for loved songs and feel the joy filling my heart when I sing them no matter if every note comes out right or not  
I find comfort in Bible passages and sermons

Sometimes the word of God challenges me and I find time to discuss my doubts and hesitations with brothers and sisters in Christ

I sometimes need this ever so familiar place to find God in my prayers

I love the thought that we all are connected through our faith and our prayers

It does me good to be held in prayer by the congregation and to start every day by praying for the needs and concerns that have been shared with me.

I support the idea that God's house is a house in which basic needs are met, in which people find asylum, friendship and a home far from home. .

And every time I enter this building I open my heart to praise God and lay before him the week that lies behind me as well as the days ahead.

From the hot cup of tea to the hug when I leave church... from the songs of praise to prayers of desperation... coming to church gives me strength to endure. And I have found God's dwelling place which is as lovely as it is suggested in the psalm.

Do you remember places that felt similar to you?

Where in the world have you found holy places in which you could be at home with God?

Is Peace Church such a holy place for you?

What makes you feel like coming home on a Sunday morning?

What do you miss?

What is your contribution when it comes to making church a home to others?

None of us knows where our journeys will lead us to. We can't say for sure that the housing we are living in at the moment will be our home forever. Maybe we hope that it will and maybe we pray that it won't.

What we all have in common is the desire to feel at home somewhere. To feel loved.

To feel safe. And to be at peace with ourselves, the people around us and God.

God wants us to know that whether we are near or far from home we are at home in God's kingdom. Without language barriers. Without social classes. Without a distinction of race, age or gender. We come as we are and the door is wide open.

I wish for you that wherever your path leads you you will find a dwelling place in which you can be at home with God and with fellow Christians.

And that the sentence „There's no place like home“ is not an expression of desire but a statement that you have found a place of peace, joy, comfort and love.

God is waiting for you as your host. Don't hesitate to live with him.

Amen.