

**“A Better Home”**  
**Maple Grove UMC**  
**December 5, 2021**  
**Rev. John Wagner**

It is so good to be here. Thanks for the warm introduction, thanks for receiving my wife JoAnn and me. Thanks for supporting my sister Patty through her recent surgery and in many other ways. And mostly, thanks for being disciples dedicated to both faith and the practical application of that faith. I’ve heard stories about your remarkable community ministries here, and feel at home among likeminded friends. I also feel at home because if I have a home town, it’s here in Columbus. Our dad was a preacher, so we moved around some, but I went to junior high and high school close by in Upper Arlington, and when asked this is where I tell people I’m from. This is also the first time I’ve preached a sermon in my hometown, so it’s a special day for me.

It was here in Columbus I became an Ohio State fan, which has turned out to be one of my great loyalties no matter where I’ve been. JoAnn and I served in Indiana for much of my career, and it was there my loyalty actually intensified. I held on even when I pastored a church in South Bend, where they delude themselves into thinking they have this great team – they can get pretty obnoxious about it. But every so often I chose to be pretty obnoxious back. I used a transistor radio to listen to play by play of Ohio State games while attending games at Notre Dame stadium, somewhat to the annoyance of those who invited me.

Now, I bring up this passionate loyalty so that I can talk a bit about Patty and my’s mother. She was also an Ohio State fan, but there was a difference between her and the rest of our family. We’d all be watching the game on TV, and she SAID she wanted Ohio State to win, but then the announcer would relate something about a player on the other team, something about his background or his struggles with an injury, and she’d start to feel sympathetic toward that guy, and would then start to express very mixed feelings, greatly irritating the rest of the family. I vividly remember the 1970 Rose Bowl. Ohio State was on track to be national champions. All they had to do was beat Stanford, which should not have been that difficult. But then the announcer began talking about Jim Plunkett, Stanford’s quarterback. He’d grown up poor, his parents were Mexican Americans, and ... they were both blind. It’s true, you can look it up. They’d never seen him play. And my mother switched loyalties just like that. When Ohio State got behind, and then further behind, she urged us all to be happy for blanketyblank Jim Plunkett! I was a reasonably respectful teenager, but I believe I told her to just shut up

mom! But she didn't, Ohio State lost, and the whole Jim Plunkett episode became part of our family lore. But it also taught us a lesson.

Now to my way of thinking, there's a similar lesson to be found in that passage from Luke's gospel we heard today. It's a reiteration of an ancient vision that first came to the prophet Isaiah. We hear about the valleys being lifted up, the mountains brought low, the crooked becoming straight, the rough ways made smooth – and the return of all people to their creator, as it says, “all flesh shall see it together” which means that all will be made right again, all will be corrected, all will know salvation. In a time when tribal loyalties reigned supreme, when your identity as a Jew or a Samaritan or Roman was supremely important, this represented a vision of a life that hearkened back to the Garden, where humanity started, where all creatures lived in harmony, AND where it was always intended we would live. The Bible offers this vision in many ways using different terms, talking about a promised land, then a kingdom of Heaven, then a new Jerusalem and so on. It's where we are supposed to be, where our true loyalty and true citizenship must reside. These words from Isaiah and other visionaries call us to see that. Now, my mother's timing may have been a bit off that New Year's Day in 1970, but I know now she was part of that call to raise our eyes from the things that seem to matter so much in the moment, and see more clearly where God wants us to be – our true home with him – and how that changes us, or rather, restores us to who we were created to be. And she was right. She had the right message, I'm forced to admit.

In the Gospel of Luke the one carrying that message is John the Baptist. Luke goes out of his way to first name all the other important people of that time – the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod and his brother Philip, Lysanias and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. But instead of these illustrious figures God used this man John the Baptist to bring a vital message to the world. He was a very rough character, it says he wore a coat of camel hair, he ate locusts – like the locusts we saw and heard this past summer. He ate the honey he found in trees and bushes. He wandered in the wilderness, he had no house, no real home. And he spoke loudly, and sometimes scared people and clearly annoyed people. And yet God used him to share his message, that one day soon we would be brought back where we were meant to be, and that someone special was on his way who would lead us all back to our true home, our permanent home.

A week ago Saturday I conducted a memorial service. It was not in a church or funeral parlor, but at one of our local Moose lodges. It was for a man named Chet Morris. Like John the Baptist he was roughly dressed and rough in appearance, he was always scrounging for his next meal, he had a loud voice and yes, sometimes it scared people. And for most of the time

I'd known him, he didn't have a home. He slept outside and looked it. I got crossways with him once or twice – he'd want to shake hands with everyone coming into the church, kind of like a doorman, but I didn't want him doing that, his hands were so filthy, and we argued and he stormed off. About a month ago now we'd heard he died. He was 60. At first the rumor was he'd been murdered, which was, sad to say, pretty easy to believe, but no, it was a heart attack most likely. Then we found out Chet had a family – he hadn't seen them in many years, sometimes decades. A daughter, some brothers, some sisters-in-law, two precious granddaughters, including one he'd never met. So what kind of memorial service do you have for a guy like Chet? Well, strangely enough, we found some things to celebrate. We could celebrate the fact that he'd been doing better this past year. His clothes and hands were cleaner, he was more polite, less pushy. He came back to our church, sat quietly, made a few friends. He found an apartment. When his daughter and brothers got into that apartment they found it to be in pretty good order. He had used his stimulus checks rather wisely, which amazed all of us. These were hopeful signs, and we lifted them up as best we could. So, in a way, you could say his life was pointing us all to something more positive, something better, more universal. You could say he'd become a bit like John the Baptist, that God was using him to convey a hopeful message. And we could be happy about that. But folks, I need to say, very clearly, while Chet was indeed kind of like John the Baptist, that he was kind of, in his own way, bringing a welcome message that the rough places could be made smooth, the crooked could be made straight, this was definitely not the happy conclusion of, say, a Hallmark Christmas movie. It was still very very difficult for his family, and those there to support his family. Frankly, there was just too much heartache to overcome in an hour or two, too much hurt inflicted by Chet, particularly for his daughter who'd had a very sad, very difficult upbringing, and was deprived of a real home herself for much of her growing up. In fact, there was tension in the room when it looked like I might be going for some kind of happy ending that was also something of a false ending, a fairy tale, a sermon that wraps it all up so nicely and neatly but is really conveying an illusion – I'm sure you've heard a few of those sermons. So the people there, myself including, were forced to find hope in something beyond those few encouraging signs at the end of Chet's life. We were forced to look for a more authentic hope - the hope, the expectation, the faith, the vision, that in the end, can only be found in God. And yes, this is the ultimate message of John, and all the prophets of old.

Friends, I know you have a ministry with the homeless. Our church has one as well, and my guess is we are all finding out it's anything but easy. Perhaps it can seem that way to those who helicopter in, who fly down and then quickly fly back up again, perhaps congratulating themselves on a job well done, a mission accomplished. But taking that deep dive, that's

different. Getting to know such persons, and starting to comprehend all that heartache within them and in those who have tried to love them – that’s a ministry of a whole different order. I have a social worker friend, Daryl, who has worked with the homeless for most of his life. He occasionally lets go, lets down his guard, tells me stories of how, in the end, drugs, mental illness, abusive home life and other traumas have rendered all his efforts null and void. His faith that God wants him to continue to serve in this way is quite often the only thing that keeps him going.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, the 11th chapter, there is a description of all the heroes of old, the children of Israel, the children of the Covenant who strove with all their might to follow God. These brave men and women endured hardship after hardship, terrible ordeals, torture even, in order to serve God and get to the promised land. But then it says, quote, “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better home, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.” End quote.

Folks, this is who we need to be. The strivers, the seekers, who are doing our very best in the here and now, but who also, in the end, know ourselves to be strangers and exiles on the earth. We work hard at the tasks set before us, we are faithful to them, we are encouraged by the occasional win, by a victory for our team, but in the end we know are called to something beyond all that, and for that very reason, we do not lose hope. We are the people who celebrate a real God, who chose to come down to physically live with us, not so we can make a few minor adjustments, straighten things up around the house, making it a bit nicer – and likewise not just so we can have a happy holiday at the end of a long year. No, he came so that we might know we have a savior who levels all mountains, fills all valleys, straightens all paths. Christ came, and friends, his Spirit is still with us, giving us the vision that all will be fulfilled one day. And in living within this vision, we are, EVEN NOW, living in our future home, and our true home.

My sister suggested I might share with you that in addition to being a local pastor I’ve also spent a lot of time working with Palestinian Christians. It’s become part of my life’s work. I bring that up, controversial as it might be, because many of these persons and families have ALSO lost their homes. It’s due to forced expulsions by the Israeli government when Israeli only cities are built in the West Bank over the bulldozed remains of Palestinian villages. I don’t

want to get any further into the politics of this here in this sermon, and I'd be more than glad to speak with any of you at any time if you want to talk further, but allow me to say two things I know are absolutely true: First, these brothers and sisters in Christ, descendants of the original Christians, are day to day dealing with an increasing demoralization and depression. No question about it. There is almost no confidence that things will get better, not for themselves, not for their children, many of whom choose to flee to other countries. These Palestinian friends tell me plainly, they are not at all optimistic, but then folks, and this is my second point, they then almost always say they ARE ... hopeful. You see, their lives and spirits are not entirely determined by the so-called facts of the situation, the stark realities, the impossible and intractable political problems. They also have hope, and it's a divine hope, a Godly hope. To them this is quite different from optimism, quite different from positive thinking. It's rooted in their faith in God and It transcends their day to day experience, transcends their day to day victories and defeats. It elevates them to God's vision for the world, for an ultimate peace, an ultimate reconciliation of all the tribes, what John the Baptist and so many others told us to look for.

Friends, let me summarize. What I'm talking about here is really pretty simple. We receive this simple truth all the time, certainly in our time of holy communion, when we read the Bible publically, when we talk among ourselves about doing something to serve our community. It's this understanding that there is a God, and not a remote deity at the center of the universe, but one who is made real in the here and now, and is also directing all of creation toward an ultimate fulfillment beyond our time. As we go about our business this week, in tasks large and small, let's take that perspective with us. In a season of giving and receiving gifts, this is the greatest gift. Let's receive it, allow it to strengthen our resolve, and then share it with others. Amen.