

**Sermon 6 Easter C    May 26, 2019**  
**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Almost Heaven**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

It was on a drive along a winding road through a scenic countryside, nowhere near West Virginia, that singer and songwriter Taffy Nivert began writing a song that has transcended time, genres and continues to bridge differences. Her partner Bill Danoff who is also a singer songwriter liked it so much he started working on the song too. But it was missing something. The couple thought perhaps they'd sell the song to country music legend Johnny Cash, but while headlining with another singer songwriter at a club in Washington DC between Christmas and New Year in 1970, they changed their mind and shared the song with John Denver instead. John fell in love with it, and together, all three singer songwriters collaborated to write a song people all over the world would come to know. Every time they performed the finished song at the club where they were headlining, the audience gave them a standing ovation lasting over 5 minutes.

Later, in interviews both Dan and Taffy say that's when they knew they had a hit song. John Denver never doubted the song was a hit, but he also felt the song had more than just the potential to sell. That's why when the record company that published the song almost gave up on it after it failed to reach number one in the music charts after a few weeks, John told them to keep plugging the song. And John's instincts were correct. The song did go to number one on the country and pop charts, it also became imbedded in the hearts of millions.

I can remember reading a reflection several years ago in the Forward Movement's Forward Day by Day daily devotional written by someone who had served as a military chaplain that described a time when a barracks full of soldiers from all parts of the country went from sullen silence during a meal near the holidays to everyone signing together after one soldier began singing the song those three singer songwriters created: *Take Me Home, Country Roads*. The chaplain wrote how moving the experience was, and in that barracks in another part of the world, somehow through the singing of a song everyone knew that touched on a longing everyone shared, somehow the Kingdom of God was present and real and everyone was experiencing the very thing they had been longing for: home as it is described so perfectly in the first two words of the song: almost heaven.

The longing for home is a universal one, which means no matter our skin color, age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or identity, politics, or economic status, everyone at one time or another experiences a sense of longing for home. Maybe it is when you are far from the home you grew up in, like college students or deployed

military personnel. Or maybe you feel it after losing a parent or sibling. Or when the house you grew up in is sold, or you move out of the house where you raised your family in. Or when you move away to another state. Chances are, no matter who you are, you can relate to that feeling of longing to be home. And you are not alone in that longing.

Which might mean that longing for home goes beyond place and people, and is about something deeper. Perhaps it goes all the way back to the beginning of humanity in the theological sense; perhaps it is a longing for the One who made us and came to walk with us through the Mystery of the Incarnation. The Rt. Rev. Taylor Porter, the Bishop of Western North Carolina has written, "Home is not a building. Home isn't a family. Home is a vision of wholeness. Being home is knowing you are connected to the One who is your home. Home is finally tasting the Kingdom of God. Home is where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven."

This is exactly what Jesus was talking about in this morning's Gospel lesson. It doesn't matter where we are, where we live, or who we live with. Home is what God makes with us through Jesus and our love for Jesus. Together, we can create home with God through Jesus that looks something like the vision described in the book Revelation we heard in our second reading this morning, where the love of God radiates like a bright light, where there is no need of a temple because God is home with us, where there is healing, and belonging. And it doesn't happen just in some afterlife, it can, and it does happen here. Right here and right now.

Church of the Good Shepherd, this week I went to Columbus to meet with a priest serving as interim at one of the Episcopal Churches there and I bragged about you. I talked about the ministry we are doing together: CrossRoads Café coffee shop ministry and all that goes with it, the TARDIS, the open chapel, the ways we share our building with the community, Free Lunch, music ministry and so much more. I talked about the ways we reach out and welcome our neighbors from all walks of life. Most importantly, I talked about why we embody the sense of home Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Not because of our own talents or skills, or resourcefulness, although those things are good and are part of it. We embody the sense of home because, at least ever since I've been here as your priest-in-charge and now as your rector, we are aware of and listen to the Holy Spirit in our midst. Writer Catharine Marshall once described the Holy Spirit as our Friend, the Person of the Trinity who is among us as a helper who helps us remember the words and life and death and resurrection of Jesus while at the very same time calls us to follow Jesus a little more deeply, often through starting new ministries or exploring new opportunities. Through

ways mysterious, sometimes a bit scary, at other times calming and comforting, and others uplifting and always joyful, the Holy Spirit has been and continues to be our Guide. And our Friend. It's a collaborative effort, where we are all working and praying and listening together.

And it's this collaboration that shines like a bright light. When Bishop Price, the retired bishop of this diocese, visited us back in April, he pulled me aside several times – sometimes during the worship service – to tell me how impressed he is with the atmosphere of the Love of God through Christ, the atmosphere of home, he felt here. As you all passed the peace with your usual wonderful warmth, Bishop Price pulled me aside to marvel at you; he wanted me to see his joy at seeing you embrace the Peace Jesus gives. The Peace of love, not the peace that results from fear of powerful. And when he left Good Shepherd that day, he left feeling something too few people feel when they leave a church: encouraged and hopeful. Because he'd been home, he'd had a taste of God's Kingdom right here, a bit of heaven, or at least almost heaven.

I share this with you not so you get puffed up with pride, but to hopefully encourage you. Because we know it is not always easy, and it takes time, and sometimes it can be scary, and while we certainly can rest when we need to, we also need to be aware of what we are creating together, and how many are longing for that sense of home and have yet to experience a home that actually can fill them with joy and hope. So that we continue to listen to our Friend the Holy Spirit and consider the many ways we can invite people to come home and take this sense of almost heaven into the world with us. This is what following Jesus is; and it isn't just for season, it takes a lifetime, and is our life together, whether it is going down country roads, side streets, interstate highways, or paths through the woods, wherever we are, whenever we love Jesus and share that love, we are home, that feels almost like heaven.