The people of Judah felt besieged, bereft and abandoned. They had been conquered and marched like refugee prisoners into exile in Babylon. They felt homesick, for they had been forced to leave their beloved homeland. They just felt like giving up. But notice that instead of commiserating with them, their prophet Jeremiah admonishes these people to recognize that “home” wasn’t necessarily back in Jerusalem. He tells them that “home” would now be wherever they were, for they carried God inside them, and wherever God is, that is Home. So Jeremiah instructed them to make themselves at home right where they were, captive in Babylon. “Build houses. Plant gardens. Raise families,” he told them. In other words, get on with your life! Celebrate the goodness of your life even in the midst of trouble. Don’t wait until outer circumstances are just right. For God is with you now in these difficult and dark times as much as God will ever be you in easier days.

Jesus came to tell us the very same thing. Jesus knew that the sense of being at home – of well-being, security and confidence - is something inside us, a faith perspective, an attitude of inner strength that comes from God. What was Jesus talking about? Where exactly was this home in God? Jesus certainly wasn’t referring to a physical home. Jesus didn’t have such a home. He was homeless. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” he said (Luke 9:58). “My kingdom is not of this world,” he told Pontius Pilate as he stood on trial for his life. Where was his kingdom, his home? It couldn’t be pointed to. But it was somehow always right there in everyone’s midst.

Jesus made himself at home wherever he went. When he sat down to eat dinner with the rejects and low life of Palestine he felt completely at home. When he called the hated tax collector Zacchaeus out of the tree, Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house and made himself at home there. When he went to the house of Mary and Martha of Bethany to relax with his disciples he was completely at home. And when he broke bread with his followers for the last time in the Upper Room on the night of his arrest, even then he still felt at home. Jesus carried his home inside him, and he invited his disciples to do the same. When one of his disciples asked Jesus what would happen to them after his death, Jesus answered, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. On that day you will
know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you...my Father will love [you], and we will come to [you] and make our home with [you]” (John 14:18ff).

This morning we are being invited to create home within ourselves like those first disciples. We are already home, that's the thing. God has called us to be together in this place and time. Now this home, here at Emmanuel, here in Watertown, NY, in the United States of America, isn’t perfect. Neither was Babylon or the Upper Room. Yet it’s beautiful and it’s good and it’s treasure to us. God’s profoundly comforting, empowering presence inside our very being assures us that we can be at home even in the midst of any threat or imperfection.

Some years ago I saw a film called “Welcome to Sarajevo” based on the true story of a British news reporter who was assigned to the besieged city of Sarajevo during the worst of the Serbian attacks on that city during the Bosnian War in the 1990’s. At the end of the film there is a scene that continues to haunt me. Several of the embattled people of the city, old men and young, women with children, students and orphans, all at great risk to themselves are making their way up some steps to a grassy knoll in the center of Sarajevo, where a young musician has bravely planted himself with his cello and is playing the most beautiful melody. His cello sings, and in the music you can hear the weeping of the people who have suffered and died in that city, but you can also hear something else. You can hear their inner strength, their inner triumph. These people of Sarajevo, these beleaguered people in this wretched, burned out, war-torn city, were learning to live as if their true home were inside them, in their hearts, where enemy snipers couldn’t even touch them.

Now, several years later, we worry about people upended by disasters, such as the victims of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti and along our own eastern coast. And for the past five years, we have wondered, What about Syria? What about the millions of refugees pouring out of the city streets of that beleaguered nation? We grow sicker by the day by news reports of death and destruction in Aleppo. We worry about the people there, the aid workers, the civilians, the hospital patients and medical staff, the children.

Sometimes it is our job to create home for others. To make a safe, secure place for people who have been uprooted to bloom and blossom and heal, when their own homeland has become unfit for happy childhoods, for peace-filled family life, for the security of a roof over one's head, food on the table, schools to learn in, businesses to run.

This past August a little 6-year-old boy from New York named Alex saw the horrifying photo of a bloodied and shell-shocked Syrian boy in Aleppo who had been picked up by ambulance, and now stared blankly at the camera. Alex decided to write a letter to President Obama, which Obama later read to the representatives of the United Nations. You may have seen it – it made a powerful impact all over America. I’d like to read it to you:
Dear President Obama,

Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to...park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan. Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys Catherine will share her big blue stripy white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he [can] smell Catherine’s lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn’t let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can’t wait for you to come!
- Alex, 6 years old

Even in the midst of suffering, challenges and great difficulties, we can be that home, that refuge for those who have no safe home on earth. As the poet declares at the base of our very own Statue of Liberty declares,

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

God is gently whispering, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Let this moment, this place, these people, be your refuge, your home, for I am here. Let my wholeness embrace your brokenness. Let my peace wash over your fears. Let my perfect and complete love swallow up your mistakes and imperfections. You are home.”

When we have God to inspire us and guide us, all we’ve ever needed and hoped for - all the treasure in the world - is mysteriously laid at our feet. Let’s build our community right here, and invite others to join us. Let’s plant gardens of mission and ministry. Let’s raise up our children and grandchildren on love and on God’s Word right here. In this crazy, imperfect, painful world we live in, in this time of polarity and hostility in our country, in this time of shaky peace and economic uncertainty around the world, and troubles in our own lives, let us dare to go ahead and make others and ourselves at home. For God is our home, and God is with us, now and forever.

Home is not in some far off place or time, across the bridge or over the rainbow. It’s here, now. It’s in the hearts of people in Aleppo, in Sarajevo, in the United States of America. It’s in this church. Home is right where God’s people are. Let’s set down roots, to plant gardens, to raise families, to look out for each other, to build community, right here at Emmanuel Church. Look around you for a moment. Think about the people beside you.
and around you. Look at the altar with its flowers and candles, look at the stained glass windows and the stories they tell. Feel the memories and the hopes and dreams; feel the faith of this place! This room would be nothing but an empty shell if it weren’t for you who come here every week to worship. You have made this house of God a home.

Let’s pray together. God, thank you for making us a home wherever we are. Thank you for making yourself at home in our own human hearts. Show us how to open our homes and our hearts to others. AMEN.