

So This Is Home

*delivered by the Rev. Dr. Lawrence Wood at the installation of
the Rev. Ms. Shannon Wall, 1 May 2011, South Britain Congregational Church*

Some years ago, Shannon bought a home in Wilton looking over a large pond. The pond was stagnant and covered with green scum, but the house was beautiful, and she could sit on a screened porch with a pad of paper as her thoughts sang like crickets or birds.

One thought in particular rose persistently – that she should answer a call to ministry. It sang and it sang, and it filled every room.

But Shannon had just settled into this house. The last thing she wanted to do was leave. She had lived in so many houses, as the child of a family in government service, who had moved a dozen times in seventeen years. There had been sojourns in Germany, Sweden, and Chantilly, Virginia.

When she had first come to New York City, she had squeezed into NYU student housing, then had taken an apartment in Brooklyn just upstairs from some Village People – literally, the Village People of recording fame – and eventually had worked her way back through Manhattan up to 29th Street.

There had been homes in Baltimore, Greenwich, and Norwalk, each of them marking phases of her life.

And now this place in Wilton, secluded yet filled with sunlight, perfect for entertaining friends or for solitude. Of course, when she found a very good man to share it, he was a real estate agent.

But the call to ministry persisted, her husband graciously yielded, and she went to Yale Divinity, where that song took on some resonant verses:

(Jan plays piano chords softly beneath the scripture)

*I was glad when they said, Let us go to the house of the Lord.
Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.
Jerusalem – built as a city that is bound firmly together...*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.
For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, Peace be within you.
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.*

(The music ends)

Sometimes the psalms speak to us like nothing else. This one really spoke to Shannon about why she loved the church. Good people, lay and clergy, had been there at significant times, when God had restored her health and shown a use for the full range of her gifts. In church she had found the home she'd always longed for.

Maybe you feel these verses resonating within you and can identify with the psalmist, who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to find a place like nowhere else in the world, that somehow felt like home.

So this was the fabled Temple, the house of God's people. These broad courtyards belonged to everyone. Strangers greeted one another as family, their voices blended in songs of praise, and these pilgrims helped to care for the poor, the lame, the very young – which is why the psalmist said, "I will seek your good."

To be sure, it wasn't all good – in many ways it was a very earthly place. Vendors did a brisk business, and politics swirled around the shadows.

But it was a place to seek the good. And it pointed beyond itself to something even finer, a realm even more real.

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So this is Jerusalem, and this is our temple – a modest affair with a boiler room and a photocopier. It's one thing to love a church when you've grown up in it; it's another thing to come later on and see a world of divine possibility.

In the spring of last year, Shannon and Larry drove up to South Britain and fell in love with the working tree farms and dairy farms, the general store, the Audubon Center by the Pomperaug River, the down-to-earth people – it all sang to them.

Of course, there was the matter of the church family – whether they were ready for her. *Peace be within your walls*, says the psalmist to Jerusalem. *Peace be within your walls*, says the pastor to a church, with fingers crossed, before remembering to say, *I will seek your good*.

The search committee spoke candidly about what the church had been through. They were ready to move forward. Was she?

Well, actually, despite their encouragement, Shannon had a lot to consider. Larry was going through some health challenges, as was his daughter Neva; Shannon's son Jack would soon enter his last year of high school. They all needed her at home. She sat on the screened-in porch and thought, and thought. The squirrels chattered, the chickadees and finches sang; some bird kept saying, Pew pew, pew pew, pew pew.

The church folks graciously waited. By August, she was ready.

Now here she is, pastor of this church for nine wonderful months full of growth and hope.

The long arc of God's work in her life, from the miracle of birth to the sacrament of baptism, from the rite of ordination to the offer of a call, has now come to her installation. Unlike those other milestones, this one is mostly human: a way of confirming a call.

Now that Shannon and her congregation have spent some time together, they are ready to say yes all over again.

But this isn't Shannon's home for all time. She's a sojourner, like any other pastor. She is temporary, even though she loves this church with her whole heart.

Really, her home is elsewhere – our home is elsewhere; and that other home, rather than this place, is what defines us.

(Jan softly plays piano chords)

*We look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen;
for the things that are seen are transient,
but the things that are unseen are eternal.
For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed,
we have a home not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens.*

(music ends)

These words have been ascribed to Paul, a tentmaker, who looked beyond the churches he founded to another, greater realm.

What is this other home, and what part does the church share in it? These are essential questions. There has to be something beyond this place, something even beyond worship, or it would just be empty.

Jesus called this realm the kingdom of God. It wasn't off in the future – it had a presence in the here-and-now, and went beyond it. Jesus loved his disciples, cherished their meals together, but there was another reality. When we come together in church, we can begin to apprehend it.

Out of seeming randomness comes order; out of God's actions and silences comes rhythm; out of loss and grace, forgiveness and redemption, comes melody.

Listen – that's the gospel. Listen – it's like a song within us that leads us on.

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Ever since she accepted this call, Shannon has planned to relocate here. But it has been tough to do so. Larry, a real estate agent, has seen homes sit on the market forever.

At last they put the house in Wilton up for sale...and had two offers by nightfall. Two days later they found a home in Woodbury, an 1860s farmhouse with a guesthouse and a pool.

I'm not sure how she's going to serve as parish minister while living so comfortably. Pastors are supposed to live in parsonages with horrid wallpaper and leaky downspouts. The Connecticut Conference will investigate this.

As if the weekend weren't significant already, Shannon and Larry signed papers yesterday selling one home and buying the other. Now it's official.

So this is home – the lovely old meetinghouse and stained glass, the boiler, and the copier, and the kids stomping in the balcony.

But don't mistake even this sacred space for her ultimate allegiance, or yours.

(Jan begins to play piano chords, and segues into "This Is My Song")

The gospel sings and sings. Wherever we are, whatever roof is above us, it says that we have some other estate which is very, very real. And this is the home for which we have always longed. It's the home we want. The time is right. We're ready to say yes.