

Advent: Homesick (with Hope)

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25-36 Jeremiah 33:14-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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The overarching theme for this year's season of Advent is called **Close to Home**. It's from the same resource, A Sanctified Art, that we used during the season of Lent earlier this year. We've all experienced those moments when something happens or someone says something and we think to ourselves: **That really hits close to home. There is an emotional connection that affects us because it's something that we can closely relate to on a personal level.** For example, as you're reading a book you notice a particular character is dealing with something similar to what you have also had to deal with in your own life. There's a connection that hits close to home. When you have had to struggle with something in your life (whether it be relational, financial, medical, or whatever) you can't help but be affected when learning that someone else is going through a similar experience. There's a connection that hits close to home.

As we journey through the season of Advent, guided by the lectionary scripture passages assigned for each Sunday, we will be looking for and exploring those things that hit close to home for us. And for those of you familiar with this church season of expectation, longing, and active preparation for Christmas, you know it's not all fun and games, and warm fuzzies, waiting for the arrival of the baby Jesus. In fact, the authors of this resource state"

Close to Home also names the pain many of us will carry into this season. The holidays can poke at our grief. Many will be missing loved ones lost to sickness and tragedy. The traumas of the pandemic will still be with us... Many feel alone and isolated at home. Churches are discerning transitions...as many of our spiritual homes are changing.

Yet, it goes on to add these encouraging words of hope. "This Advent, may we be comforted by the One who dwells intimately with us. May we expand safety and sanctuary for everyone wandering far from home. **May we come home – wherever home is found – to live fully with joy, hope, and courage.**"

As we explore what it means to be close to home it's a bit shocking that we start with a scripture passage that reveals how far from home we are, at least from the perspective of the Gospel writer. Our passage read from Luke 21 is known as the "Little Apocalypse". The author starts with images of distress, confusion, and fear and foreboding. Resource commentator, Presbyterian Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, reflects, "In many ways, the feelings that these words evoke mirror the past almost two years of pandemic crisis – a world in turmoil suffering from disasters, both natural and human-made – speaking to the realities and injustices of a chaotic world."

Don't we all feel a little homesick for at least some of the ways things use to be before facemasks and physical distancing, living with the fear that we might either catch or transmit the COVID-19 virus? The theme of being homesick is something that hits close to home for just about everybody. Now that things are a bit safer, the opportunity just this

past week to share the Thanksgiving holiday with loved ones and friends helped bring some relief for our homesickness to be together again. Hopefully, the upcoming Christmas holiday can provide the same opportunity. When gathering for my nephew's wedding near Dallas last month, reuniting with my two brothers and sister for the first time in over four years helped relieve a lot of the homesickness all of us were feeling for being together again.

What memories of being homesick can you recall, whether as a child or an adult? Or perhaps, what is it that you are homesick for right now? What is this community of faith known as College Hill homesick for? What is our nation homesick for? What is the world homesick for?

Closely tied to this First Sunday of Advent is the experience of being hopeful, as is represented by the lighting of the first candle in our Advent Wreath, the Candle of Hope. Therefore, how does our deep longing, our feeling homesick, intersect with our deep sense of hope? We are in the church season often known as **living an in-between time, a time of now and now yet**. We see this in the parable Jesus told in our Gospel reading, the Parable of the Fig Tree. As the fig tree provides signs that summer is already near, there are signs in our midst that reveal the kin-dom of God is near.

What signs have you witnessed or experienced where you see God engaged in our homesick world? Yes, the kin-dom of God is already here, but not yet into the fullness that the scriptures promise. Kin-dom, in Ada María Isasi-Díaz's definition, is "interconnected community, seeing God's movement emerge from *la familia*, the family God makes." God is close. These are words of hope for a homesick world. So it is with deep longing, and hope, that we watch for God's Sacred Presence in our midst, with and within us.

This morning's Old Testament reading also contains a message of hope in the midst of deep longing and feeling homesick. The prophet Jeremiah addresses God's people who find themselves in exile in Babylon. Separated from their homeland, and subjugated by a foreign enemy, Jeremiah proclaims that their time of exile is coming to an end, and that God envisions a new future of hope, promise, and restoration. In the words of the prophet: "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (Jeremiah 33: 15-16). What does that have to say to us today? Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests:

Advent is a time for acknowledging the exilic conditions of life for those persons in the world who live in situations of injustice, who experience unrighteous hands of power over them. Whether we are talking about victims of war, domestic violence, or human trafficking, whether we are envisioning people who feel the heel of the economic oppressor on their backs or those who bear the weight of political oppression on their heads, Advent is a time for proclaiming the promises of God.

The tree stump that looks to be dead and incapable of any new growth will, under the miraculous working of God, send forth a new shoot – a tiny baby – who will continue the Davidic line. Under his rule there will be no more oppression or subjugation, for God will inaugurate a new day and a new reign in which the peoples of the earth will live in freedom and safety and peace.

That's the 'not yet' portion of the meaning of Advent. Therefore, in finding a modern example that hits close to home it's not hard to imagine the deep level **homesickness**, perhaps of even being in **exile**, that our new **Afghan neighbors** must be feeling, leaving their homeland behind for their own safety. How can we help bring hope even during their homesickness?

Perhaps you have experienced times when you've felt like you're in exile, separated from that which brings healing and wholeness? If so, look for signs of hope and opportunities of restoration during this journey through Advent.

I want to close with a poem from this year's resource, written by the Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, who also wrote the liturgy found in today's worship bulletin. The poem is entitled, *Homesick*.

Homesick

How do you describe homesickness to a child?

You don't.

They know.

Children know the feeling of being away from home. It's fear, dipped in loneliness, that "What if I've been forgotten?" sonnet, or the "What if I can't go back?" refrain. Even a healthy, scrubbed-clean, showered-with-love child knows the longing of home.

But if I had to.

If I had to describe

that aching feeling, I would say:

"Homesickness is when longing and grief wrap themselves around you like a blanket.

It's the door to comfort thrown open.

It's an eye on the horizon for what could be

and the only way out is to keep walking,

to keep dreaming,

to keep looking

for signs that will point you back home."

And if you tell that to a child,

you just may realize

that a part of your spirit

has shoes on

and has always been walking,

always been dreaming,

always been looking

for the home that could be.

The door to comfort has been blown open.

Tell God I'm homesick.

I'm on my way.

May God bless, guide, strengthen, and comfort us as we, individually and as a community of faith, navigate the living of life between the 'now' and the 'not yet,' acknowledging our homesickness, our desire to be home with God, keeping alert to the signs of God's kin-dom unfolding before us.

Blessings and Amen.