

Close to Home: Homesick
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

As a matter of personal preference, I like to start my official Christmas listening music season the day after Thanksgiving. I carefully chose my first album of the season, and soon I heard the familiar voice of Emmylou Harris:

*Christmas time's a 'comin...and I know I'm going home.*¹

As it happened, my family watched a holiday tv show and the title character just wants to be home with his family for Christmas.

And I got to thinking...so much of our Christmas culture, both classic and contemporary is about people either longing to be home or trying to return home for the holidays. George Bailey, at first resentful of his drafty house, weeps with joy when he arrives home after a long night with his guardian angel. Kevin McCallister was left home alone, and while he protects his family from crooked bandits, his mother crosses oceans and half a continent in a frantic journey to her home. A Christmas Story is nostalgic tale about Christmas in 1940s middle America. Even John Boy Walton gets to “come home” to his childhood residence on Walton Mountain.

Home for Christmas is a major conversation topic “Are you going home for Christmas?” “Are your children coming home for Christmas?” “Have you decided which home is going to host christmas this year?” It is also a season of acute homesickness, too. Homesick for homes that no longer exist. Homesick for households where we are no longer welcome. Homesick for brighter days, even homesick for grandma’s christmas cookies or uncle’s egg nogg.

This Advent season, we are “coming home” as a worshipping community. This doesn’t necessarily mean home to Trinity, or Topeka, or the home of your choosing, although home may be a combination of many physical and metaphorical places. During the Advent and Christmas season, we journey through scriptures and rituals that are tender, heavy with emotion, and vulnerable. We carry the memories and truths of this season close to our hearts. Close to Home acknowledges the “already but not yet” tension of our faith: Emmanuel is with us, and yet, God’s promised day—our everlasting home—is not fully realized. It names our deep longing for God to come close to us. Ultimately, God is our home and resting place. God draws near and makes a home on earth—sacred ground is all around us.”²

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B6PSMg1Lus>

² From “Close to Home: Sermon Sermon Planning Guide,” A Sanctified Art, page 3

Luke 21: 35-56
November 28, 2021

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The word “homesick” originated in 1765 from the German compound, Heimweh, meaning “home pain or woe.”⁵ I don’t recall feeling homesick as a child and youth., but I remember those aching pangs of homesickness stinging as a young adult navigating college and graduate school. The untold truth of growing in adulthood is that people begin to treat you more like an adult, and less like a child. That meant, for me, working a retail job on Christmas Eve, ringing up customers while the family was home enjoying chili and tamales and watching “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Later, when Ryan and I were newly married and living in Louisville, Kentucky, when we didn’t know anybody or anything, we rejoiced when we found a Mexican food restaurant because it tasted like home, and we frequented it often those first few months.

The other untold truth of adulthood is that you can be homesick for people, and a feeling just as much as you can be homesick for a place.

In our Gospel Reading for today, Jesus offers an apocalyptic vision of the world. No one is homesick for an apocalypse. In many ways, the feelings of distress, fear, and turmoil 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. It isn’t surprising that nostalgia, the cousin of homesickness, was a source of comfort during the pandemic. In fact, during the pandemic, popularity for decades -old sitcoms and movies soared. Even in the best times, human beings crave the familiar.

Thankfully, Jesus enters this world offering words, not of foreboding, but of hope to a homesick people that felt far away from God and longed to be close to kin in the middle of the crisis. “Stand up and raise your heads,” Jesus said, “because your redemption is near . . . So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (v. 28-31).

Christians have the unique opportunity to be homesick for places that we have never seen or experienced. Christians are homesick for the Reign of God. We are homesick for a world where people are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. Jesus promises that in God’s reign, the hungry are fed and the poor will inherit the kingdom. I want to live in a world where resources are shared, not hoarded and guns are melted down into gardening implements. I am homesick for that home, even though I have not seen or experienced it, not in its entirety, anyway.

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Advent is apocalyptic, but we need to look first at the meaning of apocalypse. Zombie shows and disaster movies have co-opted apocalypse from its Greek meaning- “uncovering” or “revealing.” The First Sunday in Advent reveals what kind of home we can expect. That also means that what is counter to God's purposes will be revealed and rebuked. Yes, there will be a dismantling of power structures, and uprooting of the status quo. As Sam Cooke once sang, “A Change is gonna come...” but the change, though good news to the world, will be bad news to those who oppress, exploit, and abuse. In a few weeks, we will sing these apocalyptic words with Jesus' mother, Mary, who anticipates with joy what God will do through the birth of Jesus.

Homesick for an apocalypse? Maybe not, but Jesus shows us that the signs are all around that God is leading us through a homesick world.

Christmas time's a'comin', and I know that we are all going home, and God will meet us there.

Amen.