

Finding Our Way

Luke 21:25-36 & 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

First Sunday in Advent/ 28th November 2021

There's probably no other time of year that generates more forward-looking hope than Advent, an extraordinary sense of anticipation and expectation that leads us into Christmas. Advent means coming. As we wait, in the meantime, as we mark off each day of our Advent calendars, each day is informed and shaped by the day to come, informed and shaped by the future coming of that day. We wait and wait until we can no longer wait, can no longer bear the excruciating wait for Christmas morning to arrive. You can feel it in the air at the Family Service on Christmas Eve. At times it feels like our children are about to burst from all that excitement. Bring it now. Hurry up and get here.

However, Advent is also more than waiting for Christmas Day. And this is where things get tricky in the Church. We are also waiting for something else, which is why we begin this season with these difficult words from Luke's Gospel, which is obviously not a text pointing to the coming birth of Jesus. It's a reference to the coming of Christ in glory at the culmination of time. So why are we hearing this on the first Sunday of Advent when all we really want to do is sing Christmas carols now that the Christmas season has come, or so we're told? Because Advent is more than remembering the "first coming" at Christmas, it's more than remembering Jesus' birth back when. And Advent is about more than getting ready because Christmas is coming. While, yes, we do use this language, it's not the focus of our hope. Rather, the focus of our hope and the purpose of this season is to *intensify* our expectation for God's final coming, the fulfillment of God's intention to redeem the world. It points to the future when all that God promised in and through Jesus Christ, such as justice and righteousness, will be fully realized, fully embodied, and fully enfolded in the world. And as we know all too well, the world that Jesus promised is not here yet.

All of this means, this is a different kind of waiting for the Church. This is waiting, searching after what is coming toward us, preparing for the "end" or purpose or goal of history to break into the world, waiting for what the New Testament describes as the *eschaton*, meaning "the end." There's probably no other time when we're more eschatological than the weeks leading up to Christmas. Advent is eschatological, through and through. Something is coming. Someone is coming who will be and is the salvation of the world, "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" (Lk. 21:27). "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). Someone is coming who will put the world to right, who will establish justice, who will embody the love and mercy of God.

Eschatology and its related word apocalyptic (meaning *revelation*) have to do with our perceptions of time, our orientation toward time, how we view the past, the present, and the future. Referring to the end, we can mean "the end," as in finished or caput, but it can also mean end as goal or purpose, as in when we talk about the Great Ends of the Church. Think of the opening question of the Westminster Catechism. "What is the chief end of humanity? The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." Eschatology has a future orientation—and that's why during this time of year, our perspective in Advent leaning toward Christmas and the coming of Christ is thoroughly eschatological. We turn our attention toward what is coming.

The New Testament, as well as the Hebrew scriptures, are full of eschatological words and phrases, such as "waiting," "longing," "that day," "expectation," "in those days," "we see in a mirror dimly but then face-to-face," "now-but-not-yet," and perhaps the most eschatological word found in scripture, "hope." They all have to do with time, how we envision the future, what we sense is coming toward us—*coming*, that, too, is an eschatological word—and how our day-to-day living is informed by

the future we know is coming and about to break into our lives, about to appear and change our lives. Change, too, is an eschatological word; it's related to the experience of conversion and being born-again, of transfiguration and resurrection. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) said, Advent is like sitting in a prison cell, "in which one waits, hopes—and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside..."¹ This is Bonhoeffer being thoroughly eschatological. He's sitting, waiting in hope, waiting for liberation, breaking into time from outside of history.

And in the meantime, as we wait for that new day, something else begins to emerge within us. We become conscious or aware of how far we are from where we long to be, as individuals, as a church, as a people. The world that we imagine and hope for is far from the world as it is, and we live in the excruciating in-between. Now-but-not-yet. There's a part of us that knows the world is not as it should be, we know that something is missing. We have had a glimpse of it now and again, but it's not fully here. It's here-yet-not-here. Here-yet-on-the-way. To live in this in-between time is unsettling and confusing.

It's similar to the feelings we have when we are homesick. When you're homesick, you long for home, for a place of security and safety, where you're welcomed and accepted and loved, where you're known. When you're homesick, you don't know who you are, and everything is unfamiliar, and you feel like you don't belong where you are because you want to be someplace else; you want to be home. We ache for the familiar.

College students away from home for the first time know the feeling. Or when you moved out of your childhood home to live in a new town or city, you know what it feels like. Or if you ever lived outside your country of birth, you know what it feels like.

The English word "homesick" originated in 1765 from the Swiss-German compound word *Heimweh*, meaning "home pain or woe."² In the mid to late eighteenth century, homesickness was viewed as a physical ailment and even considered a possible cause of death. According to medical records, homesick patients experienced the expected symptoms of depression and fatigue, but they also suffered from sores and fevers. In severe cases, sufferers refused to eat and grew so weak that they eventually died. Doctors labeled their deaths as extreme cases of *nostalgia*—from *nostos*, meaning "homecoming," and *algia*, meaning "pain."³ Nostalgia was defined, in 1726, as a "morbid longing to return to one's home or native country." Severe homesickness was considered a disease. By the 1830s, with so many people on the move, sailors, enslaved Africans, convicts, and immigrants experienced extreme homesickness, they had a strong desire to return home. It was often a military medical diagnosis and considered a serious medical problem for the North during the Civil War. In the first two years of the war, there were 2588 cases of nostalgia and 13 deaths from it.⁴ The last mention of "nostalgia" on a death certificate was 1918.⁵

As we begin Advent with Luke 21, known as the "Little Apocalypse," we remember how far we are from home. We know we are east of Eden, and a flaming sword bars the way back to the garden (Gen. 3:24), and there's no going back. We can't go back home. Still, there's something in human nature that remembers that place, that time, and longs for it. Perhaps it's called Enchantment or Innocence. While we are conscious of what we have lost, we also dream and grieve because we know that the world is not as it should be.

We are searching for home, both physically and symbolically. Home, memories of home, and "past Christmases long ago" loom large during the holidays. We become nostalgic as we remember loved ones no longer with us. We know that many have lost their physical homes due to natural disasters or financial strain. Thousands have been displaced from their homelands or have had to flee from home. 125,000 Afghan refugees will be resettled in the United States in 2022.

This first week in Advent speaks to our deep longing—for home, to live, to dwell in that place where we feel safe, secure, and well. In the meantime, in the longing, it can feel like we're lost between two worlds, far from home. Many feel these days like they're wandering with no clear way forward. Maybe you've lost your way.

And here's the uncanny thing about Advent and the eschatological vision found in scripture: as people of faith and hope, we can be homesick for a world we have never actually known but can imagine. There is a Welsh word that speaks to this phenomenon. *Hiraeth* is a spiritual longing for a home which maybe never was. It is nostalgia or homesickness for an ancient place that one cannot return to.⁶ It is the echo of the lost places that belong to our past. The soul remembers and grieves for those places. It is in the wind, and the rocks, and the waves. It is nowhere and everywhere. It's a longing for the past.

But I believe that there is also *spiritual* longing for a home that never was but is coming. And this experience, this feeling, this hunch, this hope is embedded in scripture, and it's planted in the depths of the human soul. C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) called it "the inconsolable secret" which exists in us; the "inconsolable secret" is a desire for the "far off country," a longing, a desire Lewis says that hurts so much that we mistake it for Nostalgia or Romanticism or Romance or Adolescence. Sometimes we don't know how to talk about it, Lewis says, "because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience."⁷ Yet, it sits in our souls. It's a longing, an ache for something, for someone. Ultimately, it's a hunger or an ache for God who is our home, a longing for God to enter our homesick world and dwell among us. I'm grateful to Lewis for giving this experience a name. For that longing, that ache, I believe, can lead us home. As Augustine (354-430) wrote in his *Confessions*, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until they rest in Thee."

For what are you most homesick?

Advent places a spotlight on what is always true. God's kingdom is drawing near. It is both here and on the way. Images of distress, confusion, and fear are all over Luke 21. In many ways, the feelings that these words evoke mirror the past two years of the pandemic crisis—a world in turmoil and suffering from natural and human-made disasters, and, as we know especially today with the emergence of the Omicron variant, it isn't over. These experiences speak to the realities and injustices of a chaotic world. God comes to us in Jesus, not with words of foreboding but of hope, hope for people feeling far away from God and longing to be safe in a harsh, crisis-torn world. God is still coming to us, coming close, close to home, close to where we live, to take us to where we long to be, to that place that will truly feel like home, where we were meant to live, a home we have never seen but know is on the way.



The theme for today's service and sermon—homesickness—is inspired by the Advent-Christmas series Close to Home, developed by the worship designers at A Sanctified Art (sanctifiedart.org).

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Edited by Eberhard Bethge. Dated 21 November 1943, Tegel Prison, Berlin, Germany (New York: Macmillan 1972), 134.

² The compound *Heimweh* is from the Swiss dialect, expressing a longing for the mountains, and was introduced to other European languages by Swiss mercenaries in the seventeenth century. See: https://www.etymonline.com/word/homesickness#etymonline_v_12121.

³ Jen Pollock Michel, *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 27. The Modern Latin word *nostalgia* was coined 1688 in a dissertation on the topic at the University of Basel by scholar Johannes Hofer (1669-1752) as a rendering of German *Heimweh* "homesickness."

https://www.etymonline.com/word/homesickness#etymonline_v_12121.

⁴ "Sanitary Memoirs of the War," U.S. Sanitary Commission, New York, 1867 cited in

https://www.etymonline.com/word/homesickness#etymonline_v_12121

⁵ Cited in Michel, 27

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210214-the-welsh-word-you-cant-translate>.

⁷ C. S. Lewis explored these themes in his sermon "The Weight of Glory," preached at Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford University, 8 June 1941, included in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1949).