

Home Sick

Have you ever been homesick? I remember being at sleep overs with friends, and inevitably there was at least one child who couldn't stay the whole night. You know the one, that has to call their parents at midnight and have them come pick them up because they miss their home.

I would always roll my eyes and be judgy. That is until I finally experienced homesickness for the first time. I had just graduated from high school (yes, I was much older when this occurred) and I took a job as a counselor at Store Camps in Napoleon, Michigan, just outside of Jackson.

I had worked there as a volunteer for one week of Outdoor Education and I loved every minute of it. So when the possibility that I could be paid to work there for three months in a row, I jumped at the chance. I was so excited and I bought a new sleeping bag and all kinds of camp clothes and I set out for my summer experience.

It was probably the second week I was there, that I started to miss home. I really hadn't been away from my family for that long. I had been excited about this adult thing I was doing, but I was miserable. This was before cell phones, face time or even e-mails. I would wait pathetically every day for the mail to arrive for some kind of news from home. I would cry in my bunk bed at night. I wondered what was happening back home. What was I missing out on by not being there. Have you ever been homesick?

The word Homesick originated in 1765 from the German compound Heimweh, meaning "home pain or woe?"

We begin Advent today, with our theme "Close to Home." During Advent and the Christmas season, we will 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.

It is kind of weird that we begin our Advent journey, not with Mary or Joseph, the shepherds, or even John the Baptist or Elizabeth. We begin Advent with adult Jesus offering us a prophecy and a parable filled with fear and mystery. This particular scripture that we heard is within a longer section of Jesus describing the coming destruction of the temple. It was a public statement that no doubt added to the conspiracies and plots stirring against Jesus.

The fate he talks about is filled with terrifying details: the temple demolished, false prophets, wars and uprisings, food shortages, natural disasters, persecution and epidemics. That sounds a bit too familiar these days doesn't it?

The world isn't as it should be. Many have lost their physical homes, many feel alone, and many are isolated. Many of us feel as if we are wandering with no clear way forward. We have this deep longing for our home to be made whole, made right and made well. With this deep longing, we watch for God. And thankfully, God enters a homesick world.

Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri writes in her commentary, "The famous Puerto Rican song, "En mi Viejo San Juan," has described the sentiments of many in the Puerto Rican diaspora. The song, written in 1943 by Noel Estrada for his brother stationed in Panama, recounts memories

of life in San Juan and the long awaited return. “My heart remained at the seafront in Old San Juan.” Listening to this song sometimes makes me a little homesick but, most of the time, it evokes warm nostalgic feelings and brings forth memories of the cobblestone streets and blue seas of my hometown.

When hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in 2017, the news footage of the massive category 4 storm contrasted with the lovely memories of the island. The words of the song resonated; my heart was, indeed, at the seafront in Old San Juan. The storm passed, and we anxiously awaited news from our families on the island. Homesickness crept in as we were far away from loved ones and wished to be close to them in the moment of need. Days later, the silence of the wait was finally broken by the buzz of a text message: “Estamos bien”. We’re ok. Those two words were hope in the midst of chaos. Those words were home.

Images of distress, confusion, and fear emerge in Luke 21. 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.

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 family 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.”

Even in *el silencio de la espera*, the silence of the wait, we are reassured that God’s kingdom is near. Kin-dom, in Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz’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. These words are home.

Take a look at art on your bulletin or on your screen. It is by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She writes this: When I began this series of visuals, I printed an architectural blueprint on a large piece of cardstock. Using acrylic paint, I added fluid strokes of blue, obscuring the white lines in the blueprint so that the plans for building a home would appear present but also blurred and concealed. I added hints of gold leaf, trying to emulate the texture of paint peeling from the exterior of a building. I then shifted to digital median photographing the painting from a number of angles and then drawing figures and details into my compositions with my stylus and iPad.

As I began this particular image, I imagined a scene of chaos and apocalypse. However, as I drew a woman lifting her head and reaching for the fig tree, I began to see a vision of beauty and hope, a glimpse of one’s whole being awake to wonder.

I think we all share a collective homesickness. It feels like nostalgia. It looks like the trauma hiding in our past. It can turn into foreboding fear that robs us of real joy. But in this image and in Jesus’ words, I see a call to resilience despite the difficult realities that confront us. I see a longing so deep that it keeps us reaching – for a home restored, for comfort renewed, for the fruit that is sure to come.

There is a Welsh word “Hiraeth” (He-rife) and it means a spiritual longing for a home which maybe never was. Nostalgia for ancient places to which we cannot return. It is the echo of the lost places of our soul’s past and our grief for them. It is in the wind and the rocks, and the waves. It is nowhere and it is everywhere.

Homesickness is a kind of yearning. And we can yearn for other things besides our home or family or the things we’ve missed during the pandemic.

How about a yearning for justice, for things to be made right, really right and good. When you think about home, think of those children who suffer abuse and domestic violence in their homes. Think about the deaths of native children who were taken away from their homes or the separation of migrant families at our border. People shot down in vigilante justice. That’s the yearning I am thinking about, a longing for a home which maybe never was, but according to our scriptures will be coming.

Jesus says “there will be signs” and those are words of hope and reassurance but far too often they are heard as words of warning and threat. And when they are, the signs are used to predict a future of impending doom and loss. They become indicators that the world will end and you better shape up or God is going to get you.

Our misunderstandings of the signs pushes us further into the darkness and deeper into our fear.

“There will be signs are not a reason to hang our head in despair or shrink from life. That we can see the signs in our lives and world means that the circumstances we face and the events that happen contain and reveal the promise of Christ’s coming. The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us, that God notices us, that God cares, that God comes to and participates in our life’s circumstances.

Jesus’ parable of the fig tree teaches us how to read the signs. The Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves. We see the leaves and we know something is happening. Summer is already near. It’s a new season, with new life, new growth, new fruit. That is the promise and good news of the Advent signs. And yet that promise, that good news, is fulfilled not apart from but in and through the reality of our life’s circumstances and our world’s events, no matter how difficult or tragic they may be.

Listen to this poem called Homesick by Rev. Sarah Speed

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 of 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.

The kingdom of God is near. We are entering a new season. We can see new life and new growth. We can produce new fruit. We can open the doors of our life with new courage and confidence. We can look on the world with a new sense of compassion and hope. We can be strengthened to do the world God has given to us.

Yes, the Advent seasons of our lives can be long, difficult and painful. But we never face those seasons without the signs of hope and reassurance, signs that point us to the one who is coming and giving us a true sense of home. Amen.