

Homesick
Luke 21:25-36, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
The First Sunday of Advent (Hope)
Woodbury UMC
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Discovering the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was one a formative experience for me. Improbably, I first heard it as it was originally written by author Douglas Adams, as a radio drama, and then again when it was reconfigured and published as a book. This was also one of those things that you would discovered had impacted some others just as it had impacted you, and a certain type of person would refer back to it, quoting it, reveling in it.

As I started my work on this sermon series, I remembered one moment from this book in particular that resonates. I don't think it's much of a spoiler to this 40 year old book to note that very early in the story, the Earth is destroyed, and significant dramatic tension comes from those very few who are aware of this trying to get off the planet and out of harm's way before it is too late. One of our main characters is Ford Prefect, who turns out to be from a faraway planet and is one of those very few who knows that the Earth is about to be destroyed, and the book interrupts the action to offer this observation:

In moments of great stress, every life form that exists... communicates an exact and almost pathetic sense of how far that being is from the place of his birth. On Earth it is never possible to be further than sixteen thousand miles from your birthplace, which really isn't very far, so such signals are too minute to be noticed. Ford Prefect was at this moment under great stress, and he was born 600 light years away in the near vicinity of Betelgeuse.

The man standing next to him reeled for a moment, hit by a shocking, incomprehensible sense of distance. He didn't know what it meant, but he looked at Ford Prefect with a new sense of respect, almost awe.

By the way, I calculate that the most I have been from my birthplace is about 5100 miles, by the way.

By now you have seen that I rarely title my sermons, but that I have titled this one, Homesick. That is because this is the first in a sermon series, titled Close to Home, that I will be preaching throughout this Advent season into Christmas and through Epiphany. You can see how the *Hitchhiker's Guide* selection might remind me of a very profound sense of homesickness, which is what I'd like to consider today.

When something hits close to home, it affects us deeply. 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 — both our feelings about Christmas and our personal histories with it, — and the wonder and awe we may feel at the miracle of the incarnation, and how we prepare ourselves to encounter our God as a newborn baby, and the story of how that came to be. Close to Home as a phrase and a concept acknowledges the “already but not yet” tension of our faith: **Emmanuel is with us**, that is why we celebrate — and yet, God's promised day—our everlasting home—is not fully realized. It names the tension between these two realities, where we find ourselves trying to make sense of this inherent contradiction. It names our deep longing for God to come close to us. This first week speaks to our deep longing—for our home to be made whole, made right, and made well. With deep need, we watch for God. Thankfully, God enters a homesick world. This week, we contemplate what that means for us.

Along with this sermon series, there is a devotional booklet available to everyone. It begins with a poem inspired by our reading from Luke, and I'd like to share it with you right now:

homesick | Luke 21:25-36
Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) 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 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.*

You will remember that last week, we spent some time considering the Biblical literary form of apocalypse, and how it doesn't really have a modern analog. How it talks in often violent or frightening terms about the end of one thing, and the beginning of something else. We get an apocalypse here in miniature, and by shrinking it down, you get a clearer sense of what is on offer. Something frightening, which reveals the Son of Man, which portends our salvation.

As we begin Advent with the "Little Apocalypse" in Luke 21, we remember how far from home we are. The world is not 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. Being homesick means that deep inside, your heart gives an exact reminder of how far you are from where you are supposed to be.

It got me thinking — why do we get homesick? I think that something triggers that feeling inside of us that something isn't as it ought to be. Consider that many of us just celebrated Thanksgiving with a family gathering. One of the things we gave thanks for was that we were able to gather as a family, because last year we could not come together. Thanksgiving can make you feel homesick, if you weren't able to be with

people you love. Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman helps fill this idea out more fully:

I have such a hard time saying goodbye to my family after a gathering or holiday. The feeling is deep in my gut; it's a turning of my stomach and an aching in my chest. There's this part of me that never wants to leave, but as I journey away, the unease shifts to eagerness as I anticipate returning to the home I've created with my partner. I have many places and people in my life that I call home. Within me there is tugging and pulling, these divergent homesicknesses that leave me never really feeling fully at home. I may feel close to home, but not quite there. It is within this kind of in between that we find ourselves during the Advent season.

Thinking along those lines, I suggest that home isn't always about a physical location. You've heard the old maxim that home is where the heart is, right? So where is **your** heart? If it is with people you love, and you can't be at their side? I think that ache is a homesickness by another name. If you have ever felt like that, you know that it can sneak up on you.

Has music ever made you cry? That can certainly trigger unexpected homesickness. What is that all about? Missing one's home is right up there with heartbreak as what's triggered when just the right song is heard. Heartbreak — that feeling of missing what was, missing what could have been, maybe should have been, but never will be. I suspect that most of us have heard music that brings on that ache, of a remembrance of a wholeness that came from feeling safe and loved and complete, and a reminder that we are not complete when we don't have that loved one in our presence, maybe don't have that loved one in our lives.

That images resonates with the 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 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.”

Needing our home to be made whole, made right, and made well, THAT is what I'm talking about. And when we are told that the Messiah is coming, it is much like the feeling we get when reading those words in Thessalonians — that time is coming, and you know it is true because you see the signs all around. There is a strangeness to thinking about homesickness as a person feeling the loss of what was, and wishing they could experience it again even as they are reminded of it — and then thinking about how we are God's people, longing to be with our Lord.

It leads to a very paradoxical feeling, that of a shared homesickness, with people we may not actually know. This is because we share a current reality with all people who claim Christ as savior — **Emmanuel is with us**, and yet, God's promised day—our everlasting home—is not fully realized. But we wish it was, we pray Thy Kingdom Come, thy will be done, and we pray it together. When we come together, when we pray this prayer with our hearts, it is all about Jesus preparing the way for a joyful reunion that need never end. Do you believe that? If you do, then how could you help but yearn for that day when you are finally, truly home, your heart has finally been made whole, and you need never be homesick again! What a great day that will be!

Those of us with pets or who are animal lovers are familiar with language about an animal finally finding her forever home, and you can get moved to tears just thinking about it — being unwanted, unloved, never belonging, and now you live in your forever home, where you are always wanted, always loved, fully and completely. Sometimes our tears come from empathy, oftentimes probably — but I bet a little also come from our own longing to find our own forever homes, where we too are always wanted, always loved, fully and completely. If we know that our forever home is with our Lord, then how much more acute of an ache, from knowing where we belong even while we aren't there? No wonder we pray for Jesus to draw near!

My heart is honestly a little troubled, the more I think about this. For a while now, the church has been in decline, not just us Methodists, but across the board. I'd bet that there is a strong correlation between the decline of the mainline church, and the emergence of people who oppose what they see in the church, while having a deep homesick ache of their own. A lot of those who claim to be spiritual but not religious? What that says to me is that they are every bit as homesick as we are, but can't see a way to

connect the dots between what they crave and what we proclaim. In contemporary society, I see a **pleading, aching yearning for spirituality**, but staunch opposition to traditional religious methods in meeting those needs.

People have grown tired of fakery and long for the authentic.

How do we engage a world that craves God, but doesn't recognize God as authentically present in what is offered? After all, we may be homesick, but at least we know where we want to be. How do we encourage such people? We have Good News, right, and a mandate to share it with the world — so how do we do that?

Consider this: In today's Gospel reading, Jesus offers us these words: "Be on watch and pray always that you will have the strength to go safely through all those things that will happen and to stand before the Son of Man." Wait, what was that? That is super ominous! At least, that is what I thought when I started to contemplate those words. But as I considered a little further, even these words felt good to me. Because they are real, and honest. In a world of fakery, they are authentic. The message is that you will be ok, but in the meantime, be on watch and pray, because it is going to get rough. In a sense, these words acknowledge that you can give your life to Christ, and even with that, you will still need to undergo the same things we all do.

Maybe we have been trying to present Christ to the world in a way that come across as fakery, rather than in a way that is authentic.

And maybe right now is our opportunity to correct that. We shy away from naming the pain of this world oftentimes for fear of offending anyone. Well, not being offensive is a reasonable intention, but then how it is that we can avoid fakery without pointing out what is really happening, without naming those situations and places that right now are loudly calling out for the Prince of Peace to make things right?

If we need to choose between authentic and risky, or inauthentic and bereft of meaning, I think people are right in rejecting fakery. So let's give them the most authentic Jesus we know. Let's not be afraid to pray that we have the strength to get through the trials, rather than telling people that with Jesus, none of that really matters anyway. They long for God every bit as much as we do. Because they feel the same tension we do, Emmanuel with

us in a world that is not as it ought to be. Let us name the tension between these two realities, where we find ourselves trying to make sense of this inherent contradiction.

I may feel close to home, but not quite there. It is within this kind of in between that we find ourselves during the Advent season. God has come close, and yet we yearn for God to do so again. As we begin this Advent season, may we acknowledge our homesicknesses, while marveling at the closeness of God—the home already within each of us. Amen.