

**First Presbyterian Church Advent Series: Close to Home**  
**1 Thess. 3:9-13, “Homesick”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/28/2021**

If we say something “hits close to home,” we have had an experience that is personal, vulnerable, perhaps painful or poignant depending on what has sparked that response in us. The phrase “close to home” can also be a cautionary one – in times of distress we may want to stick close to home. Or perhaps it’s a sign of hope after a long journey – we are finally getting close to home.

This Advent we are working with the theme “Close to Home” as cultivated by the thoughtful and beautiful liturgy, poetry, and artwork put together by Rev. Sarah Are Speed with her creative team known as, “A Sanctified Art.”

On this Close to Home theme, Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity notes that, “The Advent and Christmas scriptures are rich with home metaphors and imagery. John the Baptist prophesies about the One who is to come, but reminds us that we are still wandering far from God’s promised day; his message hits close to home, especially for those experiencing inequity and oppression. After receiving the angel’s news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth’s home, seeking refuge and safety. Christ is born in the midst of a journey home, in a crowded dwelling amidst livestock and shepherds alike. The Magi travel far from home to pay homage to Christ, and, having been warned in a dream, they avoid Herod by traveling home another way. In these scriptures, home is both physical and metaphorical, something we seek and something we are called to build. Ultimately, God is our home and resting place. God draws near and makes a home on earth—sacred ground is all around us.”

But recognizing the home we have with God isn’t always so easy.

My first year in seminary was in 2002 – 19 years ago!

I was very excited about the possibilities and ideas and new environments  
I found at Regent College in Vancouver, BC.

I arrived in the summer to take a Greek language immersion class,  
which was an intense but invigorating first experience.

I met a lot of people, but didn't have much time  
for developing friendships.

Heading into the fall semester I met more people,  
perhaps some that I could say were friends,  
but they were new friends and lacked the depth  
of the longer relationships I had formed over two years  
of living in Seattle while doing college ministry.

Additionally, I was living in an unfinished basement suite  
that didn't even have drywall on the walls or ceilings,  
and mice were a major factor in our food storage areas.

Being a Canadian school, Thanksgiving is something that happens in October,  
not November, so that connection point was out.

When Advent arrived, I could feel it in my bones: I was homesick.

My mother had died in 1999. I was beginning seminary nearly three years later,  
and the intense grief had subsided,  
but home would never be quite the same without her.

So that winter of 2002, I felt very alone.

I wasn't depressed, but I needed people who knew me and loved me.

That year, I went to my sister, Bonnie's house for Christmas.

When I arrived at her home in Washington's Olalla Valley,

I was enveloped by the warmth of the living room,  
the beauty of the decorations,

the smell of fresh baked breads and cookies.

The embraces of my sister, her husband, Dick,

and my teenage niece and nephews were a balm for my soul.

When you're homesick, there's no place like a home, even if it's not your house.  
What makes someplace home for you?

These days, finding a refuge for the homesick can be pretty difficult.  
Covid. Politics. Increased isolation and loneliness. Finances.

The people we wish were still alive to welcome us home.  
For all these reasons and more, there are a lot of people who are homesick  
and don't have a good solution for it.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica  
about his own homesickness for the community there.

Now, Paul's not from Thessalonica, and the people there aren't his family,  
but there are different kinds of homes  
that we can find and create in the world.

What are some homes you have been invited into  
or created for others outside your family?

Paul and the Thessalonian church have found a family centered in Christ.  
Paul misses this spiritual family, and he knows that they miss him.  
They want the comfort of his presence and teaching about  
the Gospel in these early days of Christianity.

So Paul writes to them with some spiritual remedies for homesickness.

First, he gives thanks for them.

Paul says, "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy  
we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

When we are homesick, we can begin by recognizing that this feeling is a result  
of being given a good gift that we can be thankful for.

The community we miss is a community that was given to us by God.  
Paul indicates that when he's praying,  
he has joy in the presence of God *because of them*.

If we have hearts of gratitude for the relationships we long for,  
that can bring us some measure of joy  
in spite of not being where we wish we were.

Second, Paul indicates that he and Silas and Timothy all pray for the community  
they are geographically separated from.

Verse 10 reads, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again  
and supply what is lacking in your faith.”

Third, our gratitude for the people we miss can lead us to pray for them  
and ask God to provide for them in a variety of ways,  
including the provision of a way for being brought together again,  
as we read in v. 11.

“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus  
clear the way for us to come to you.”

Continuing that approach, in vv. 12-13,

Paul also prays that the Lord will make their love increase  
for one another, just as Paul and Silas and Timothy’s  
love does for them.

The fourth thing Paul does in this passage at the end of v. 13  
is put their homesick feeling in perspective:

One day we will all be together again forever –  
when the Lord Jesus returns along with all his holy ones.

What we all need to learn is that there is a deeper home  
beneath the home we long for. A home that the Spirit of God  
is pulling us toward.

The home that is revealed to us during this season of Advent  
right in the middle of whatever we miss,  
whatever we wish could be taking place in our homes this year.

What is our community homesick for?

What are the collective “homesicknesses” we hold within ourselves?

How does our deep longing intersect with the deep hope of God?

As you reflect on those questions, I want to close with this poem  
by Rev. Sarah Are Speed. entitle, "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.