

How old were you when you first felt homesick? For me, I was four years old, when my family moved from St. Louis, Missouri to Rockford, Illinois, so my father could pursue his dream to be a pastor. At the time, so much of our family was in St. Louis. My earliest memories of home were full of love and laughter, surrounded by family across generations. When we moved, we left all behind. That was in 1983, and I didn't feel like I belonged to a place again until I came to Columbus in 1997. There are times in our lives where we feel like we belong, where our place in the world makes sense, and there are times where we feel like strangers, and long for an innocence lost. Often, such times overlap, where we both belong and are lost at the same time.

I think we've all been homesick these past couple years. We're eager to return to what we've lost but are not there yet. Who's ready to be done with masks and being nervous about shaking someone's hand? Me too. For you parents, how many of you are ready to be done with emails informing you that another student at your child's school tested positive for COVID? Me too, but we're not there yet, are we? Wanting the world to be different doesn't make it so. I think we're all homesick for what's been lost, fearful that it may never return. I know we can never go back to what was, but I'm still hoping for something better than what is, and that's what Advent is all about.

To me, Advent is the most wonderful time of the year, and don't confuse Advent with Christmas. Advent is not about getting the decorations out and turning the carols on. It certainly has nothing to do with the hap-happiest season of all. I mean, did you hear that Gospel reading? Bleak, huh? The dissonance between the Christmas season and Advent is startling. While I'm not opposed winter celebrations and merry-making, I believe Advent is exactly the kind of therapy our souls need this time of year. For those of you who've lost loved ones, for those of you who are grieving for what's been lost, does the Christmas season really make you happy, or is about pretending to be happy? Well, I've got good news for you, Advent is your permission slip to stop pretending and get honest about how you really feel, not what you're supposed to say. Over these next 4 weeks, at least when you are here in worship, you are welcome...no, you're encouraged to be honest about how dark it really is out there. There's a reason we recognize Advent during the darkest time of the year in the Northern hemisphere—the weather matches the season of our soul.

Just as the lectionary had us end the year with the apocalypse in Mark two weeks ago, we now begin the new year with the apocalypse in Luke, which means you can sing it with me this time, "It's beginning to look a lot like the apocalypse, everywhere you turn." That song warms my heart every time I sing it, so you better get used to it. It will become an Advent tradition around here. In Luke 21, Jesus is once again telling of the Temple's fate. Last time we heard about rumors of wars and how strongmen will come to deceive you into thinking they will save you. Earlier in the chapter in verse 11 Jesus said, "There will be wide-scale food shortages and epidemics." I read that this week and thought, that hits a little too close to home.

Now it's important when we read these texts to remember that Jesus was talking about something very specific and universal at the same time. He was specifically talking about the fall

of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, and for those who went through it, it felt like the end of the world, and it was. All the things Jesus talked about actually happened, but the Bible doesn't record this as a mere news story. No, this account was given to us because it has universal implications. Though the Temple will not fall again, worlds do fall apart, not just once but again and again throughout history. These words of warning and hope from Jesus are given to us, so that when our world falls apart, we have something to hold onto until the storm passes, and something to hope for.

Jesus says: "On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves." Anybody witness dismay in our nation in 2021? How about seas rising? Check. He says people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. With the advent of climate change, economic and racial inequality, the breakdown of trust between fellow citizens, new virus variants coming our way, how many of us are paralyzed with fear over what is to come? So, what do you do when your world falls apart and you find yourself far from home?

One option is despair, and it's an understandable one. I neither blame nor shame people who despair, because often things are far worse than we are ready to admit. Sometimes despair is just a reasonable response to our circumstances. Another option is an optimism that says, don't worry, things will get better. We all know these people who despite evidence to the contrary have this unsinkable confidence that things will somehow turn around. But notice that Jesus doesn't call us to optimism. His words suggest things may well get worse, not better. To optimists, Jesus' words seem like a downer, and that's OK. At some point, optimism runs out of steam, and we all end up in despair, and that's when Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near."

When the world starts to fall apart, Jesus says straighten your back, and look up because whether you can see it or not, freedom is coming, because God is entering our homesick world. Advent hope is not naive optimism, trying to put a happy spin on things. Hope takes the long view, knowing that though the world has died many times before, it always finds a way to rise again. That's why Jesus points us to the fig tree, how every year we see what looks like the end of the tree when the leaves fall, but winter doesn't last forever, does it? That's not cheery optimism. That's just reality.

There are signs of hope all around us if we look for them. This Advent, our youth are participating in a program in which they will send individualized Christmas cards to incarcerated people in Ohio, and the card says, "You are loved. You are wonderfully made. You have a purpose. You are a masterpiece. God has a great plan for you." Isn't that amazing? We live in a world where our youth will take time to write letters to strangers in prison, so they might know they are loved, and that gives me hope. Where do you see God entering our homesick world? If you look up, there are signs all around you.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appears. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Things are bad, perhaps even worse than you know. But stand up straight and raise your heads

because your redemption draws near. The hope of Advent is that God has come to us and is still coming, to dwell with you in both the darkness and the light. Emmanuel means God with us, and God has come to dwell with us in Jesus Christ, to taste every bit of despair this world has to offer just to be near to you. Your struggle, your despair is so precious that God said, I want to know that too. When you feel homesick, Christ has come to made to his home with you.

There are times in our lives where we feel like we belong, where our place in the world makes sense, and there are times where we feel like strangers, and long for an innocence lost. Often, such times overlap, where we both belong and are lost at the same time. For those of you who are homesick in the overlap, know this, heaven and earth will pass away but Christ words will not. So, straighten your back and lift your head, because no matter how far from home you feel, God is with you, loves you, and will never forsake you. Though the night is long a new day will dawn.