

Come Home for Christmas

Advent is an invitation. For many, it is the invitation to get into that Christmas spirit, to count down the days to the grand celebration, and let the holiday transform everything around us.

But there is a deeper and more profound invitation being offered in the season of Advent. The invitation is to remember that we are heading for home. Or if we're not, if we've forgotten that there is a home toward which to head, it is the invitation to long for the home we call the kin-dom of God. It is where family resides, where peace resides, where justice abides, and hope will rise. Advent reminds us that we shouldn't be complacent about the way things are – not that we want to become angrily attuned to every perceived failing in those around us or the world at large; but that we want to be those who look forward to something greater, something more that is just on the horizon. Advent is the call to come home.

Yeah, we called it “Come Home for *Christmas*” not “Come Home for Advent.” But that was only to catch your ear and the ears of those with whom you worship week by week in this glorious season. We're not all about Christmas, the holiday, about December 25 with all the jingle bells and tinsel. We are about Christmas, the Mass of Christ, the celebration of the Incarnate one who comes to remind us that we are not alone, and God is with us. We are about the longing for the coming kin-dom, where we will study war no more, where people will walk in the light, where joy will be found, and love will be the tie that binds us together. That's the home for which we long. That's the invitation this Advent season to your church and the world: “Come home for Christmas.”

Week 1 – November 28, 2021—Time to Go Home

[Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36](#)

Colors: Purple or Blue

INTRODUCTION

The first week of Advent has to deal with the shock. Is it time? Already? Sure, the world has been giving Christmas hints for months now, but it still seems to surprise us every year. Perhaps it is because we don't start with the Christmas story. That might be a little more palatable. No, we start with the warning signs, with the forecast for cloudy skies ahead. We start with a prophetic call to look at the world we inhabit. How close are we to the kin-dom we proclaim week after week? How close are we to this coming "on earth as it is in heaven" for which we pray regularly? Advent is about being honest.

But not hopeless. Advent is about the joy of longing for home – the kind of home that will complete us, the kind of home that will transform the world. It is about helping us remember that we have a mission and a hope. We are people who see God at work in this world, and we are partners in that remaking. We are the disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Worship this week, then, is that call to remember the hope. We cast a vision in our songs and prayers that holds up the kin-dom ideal and invites everyone to get ready to head home. It's time: that's our call; it's time to go home.

So, what do we do when we get ready to go home? We make lists. We put things in order. We set our minds on our destination. So, as we decorate our sanctuaries, we are painting a portrait of the kin-dom, light and color and vibrantly green with life, even in winter.

Our arms are open to receive those who come, maybe for the first time, maybe old friends, maybe the usual crowd, but all are welcome in God's home, our kin-dom home. Pay attention this season to hospitality; it matters. It matters always, but especially this time, this threshold time. If the church is the glimpse of the home toward which we move, then take care to reflect the welcome that is being offered.

Light, of course, is crucial to Advent. We light the candles on the wreath, not to count down to Christmas, but as a beacon to call us home. "We'll leave the light on for you" isn't just a slogan for a hotel chain, but a gospel promise that we will find our way by the light that is Jesus the Christ and now is reflected in the body of Christ, the church. So, let there be light during the season of Advent. You could, as some do, bring in more and more light each week, or you could start the season with the full complement, except for the remaining candles of the wreath, but the full complement of lights glowing in the worship space.

The first Sunday of Advent, or the Sunday of hope in some traditions, or the prophecy candle in others, is the reminder that it is time to head home.

PREACHING NOTES

There is often a dreary start to our December, in the part of the world I come from anyway. Pale gray skies, and a drizzle that turns into rain in earnest every now and then. It is sometimes warm, sometimes cold, yet wet and drippy all day. *Dreich* is the Scots term for days like this. That pretty much sums it up, don't you think? *Dreich*. *Dree-xch* (you have the gargle the last sound in the back of your throat – "*ahch*") Just saying it, you feel it: *Dreich*.

It is time to go home; time to get ready to go home; to think about going home or being home as everyone comes to you. But then you realize there is work to be done, preparations to be made, cleaning up to happen. I remember sitting in my study on a Saturday, finishing off another sermon preparation and looking out on the lawn, where not too long ago we had spent hours picking up all the leaves. But you couldn't tell. It didn't look like it, because the next carpet of crunchy brown had fallen and covered the green grass almost completely. That meant the leaves had to be picked up again, soon. If not right at that moment, then they would have to be removed before the snow falls and in the spring when it's time to start mowing again. The problem is that while the trees in our yard were bare, across the street were trees filled with the little brown crunchy dudes hanging on the branches. And of course, they wouldn't fall straight down on the neighbor's yard but would waft across the street into my yard. I wondered if that loving your neighbor thing applied to the neighbor's trees in the fall? Surely Jesus will give us

a pass on grumbling about yardwork. Don't you think? No, in fact, Jesus tells us to look at the trees. Fig trees and all the trees, he says. Look at all those leaves, he says to me, "You're gonna have to pick them up. Yours and your neighbor's both!" Look at the trees, indeed.

But is that why we're called to be arborists this Advent season? Watching the leaves fall, being at the ready like Ed Crankshaft come to life from the comic pages, ready to pounce on the single leaf that would dare to litter our lawns? Or does Jesus have something else in mind?

I'm not sure how you receive this sort of thing on the First Sunday of Advent. Sometimes, I think that folks are expecting to hear the preliminaries of the Christmas story – maybe an angel announcement, maybe a song of transformation, maybe a dream or a journey or a royal decree, but certainly not people fainting with fear and foreboding. I'm not sure I'm up to foreboding. We just don't forebode any more. Do we?

Heck, we've got movies about the end of the world that are pretty impressive in their special effects. And we go to see that for entertainment. So, if Jesus is trying to scare us, he'd better start doing a better job of it.

But then, a second look at those verses implies something different. Maybe it isn't fear that Jesus is trying to instill. Maybe it is something altogether different. Maybe it is the opposite. And what is the opposite of fear? Hope. "Look at the trees," he says. He is telling us to look for signs of growth, even in a dying season, to look for signs of life, even in a dreary landscape. "Stand up and raise your heads" (21:28), he says to us. It is our natural instinct when things are going badly, when there is a difficult moment, that we want to keep our heads down. But Jesus tells us to raise our heads, to look up, to trust, to have confidence. He is telling us to pay attention, to head home – to the home we long for, the home we hope for, the home we live for. It's time to go home.

Oh, that's a tricky one at any time of the year, but with all the distractions of the holidays, it is even more difficult. "Pay attention," he says. But I have all these things to accomplish. I've got my lists to fulfill. Places to go and things to do. "Pay attention," he says. But to what? To the end times? No thanks; the folks all wrapped up in that kind of thing seem a little bit . . . odd. A little bit out of touch. And frankly, they seem to have their priorities all messed up. If the message is,

“Take care of yourself and stay clean so that you come out well in the end,” I’m not really that interested.

“Pay attention,” he says. Advent is a multilayered time. There is the remembrance and the desire to recapture the birth of that baby again. We really want to hear that angel song and believe that if even for a moment, peace on earth is within the realm of possibility. We look back to what has been done for us. But at the same time, the scriptures remind us that there is still something coming on the horizon. We do look for the coming of the kingdom, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when we will beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when we will study war no more. There is a Someday out there toward which we lean and for which we hope. Advent is a looking forward as well as a looking back.

“Pay attention,” he says. “Look at the trees,” he says. What if there is one more layer? What if there is one more direction in addition to back and forward? What if there is an around? Look around. Look up, look down, or just look. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down” (21:34) – so that you don’t miss it, so that you don’t miss him. That’s the amazing thing about this season: there are glimpses of the kingdom that appear when you least expect it. There are sightings of the Savior in the twinkling of the eyes, in the hesitant thank you’s and the gasps of wonder. In the late-night conversations of scattered family members trying to figure out what might be next, there are prayers of hope and of love, an embrace of peace that brings tears to our eyes. If we pay attention.

Jeremiah says it simply. *The days are surely coming, says the LORD . . . I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up . . .* (33:14-15). A branch? No, a Branch. Not just any branch. Not the branches that fall with the leaves that cover the lawn; not the branches from a tree too old to sustain them anymore, not those dead things. The branches higher up are still growing, still producing, still reaching for a heaven only trees know how to hope for. It’s not the dead branch of the past we cling to, we hope for. It is the new growth. God will cause—*will cause*—a Branch to spring up. There is more to come, more hope to be revealed, more justice to be executed, more righteousness to cover the land. Like leaves on the lawn.

Yeah, when you pay attention, you see a mess you need to clean up, and that can be tiring. But you also see life, dying and rising life, enough to give you hope in a

dreary season. And a call to go home. To go forward by going back. Or maybe to go back by going forward. It is a call to be ready, to make ready, to go home.

Week 2 – December 5, 2021—The Fear of Home

[Malachi 3:1-4](#) & [Luke 3:1-6](#)

Colors: Purple or Blue

INTRODUCTION

This second Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that going home is never as easy as it sounds. We are often afraid to go home, afraid of home. Maybe we've experienced pain there; maybe we have felt unfairly judged, neglected, or unloved. Despite our desire to have home be positive for everyone, there are many who would be afraid of going home. So, as we worship, we can acknowledge that hesitancy. We can confess the times when we have not provided the sense of home that we wanted to, that we haven't been as hospitable as we could be. We can offer invitations to reconciliation, even in the most complicated of relationships. The call to come home means overcoming our fears that it won't work the way we hope, and it means committing to be an example of the kin-dom in our life together.

For many, the second Sunday of Advent is when we light the candle of peace. This is a time of coming together, of building a community of faith that is open to all. This is why we see Christmas movies telling a story of restoration, of broken relationships that are healed. Maybe there is a drama troupe in the church who can tell a story of reconciliation; maybe there could be a liturgical dance depicting a healing, a gathering up. Perhaps we need to provide prayer stations where families or individuals can come and light a candle for someone estranged, an invitation to return, despite their fears, into the loving embrace of a repentant family.

Let's also be aware that when we speak of family, it is not just the individual families that we want to be working on their sense of home. We are also talking about the whole community, the church, and the surrounding neighborhoods. There is division; there is unwelcome. Who is being left out? Who is not being

welcomed, whether intentionally or not? Who is not here, and what would it take for them to feel welcomed, included, invited?

Prayers of confession can be opportunities to open doors that have been closed too long. Anointing can be a commissioning to the task of reconciliation. John the Baptist's call isn't just a personal call to live a better life; it is an invitation to the whole community to be a sign of the kin-dom. Maybe we could send the congregation out with a mission to invite their neighbors, invite the community to join them for a special event this season, Christmas eve, or a children's pageant or a cantata. What special events are we doing for the wider community and not just for ourselves this Advent season? The truth is, some of your neighbors might just be too afraid to come unless you invite and promise to be with them throughout the whole event. Make a promise to meet them, introduce them, escort them through the evening. The fear of home is real.

PREACHING NOTES

Christmas is approaching. Sometimes there is a joy in the waiting, like counting down the days before vacation or a party. Other times, it feels like that snowball rolling down a mountain that is going to swallow you up before you can get out of the way. Just like sometimes we can't wait to go home because it is a respite, a blessing, and a joy to be enfolded back into those loving arms again. But other times, it scares us, frankly. It is often a place of judgment, of division and pain. We are overwhelmed trying to have the sense of family that the Christmas specials say we ought to have. We're afraid to go home, and we aren't ready. We may be a long way from being ready to go home.

It's easy to slip into that mode, to recognize that there is much to do before Christmas gets here. We've got to move heaven and earth; we've got to shovel out; we've got to clear the path. It is as if we are in those airplane disaster movies and we've got a crippled jetliner coming down on a runway that isn't cleared. Everyone is shouting; the machines aren't working; there is disaster on the horizon. It is as though there is never enough time, like it is all going to fall apart this time, and it is all your fault! When I was in seminary, there was a drugstore

chain that used the advertising tagline, "Christmas is closer than you think." It sounded like a warning or a threat.

That is why John the Baptist seems to fit in so well with the Advent season. There is threat aplenty in the early part of the Gospel of Luke. Sometimes, we'd like to skip over John's tirade and get on to the angels and the baby and the sheep. But no, let's pause and listen in again: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (Luke 3:4.)

OK, so we stopped before the really threatening stuff. And next week, we jump back to Matthew and his version of the end of John's story. So, no baby snakes this year. Instead, we get the get-ready speech, the Christmas is closer than you think slogan. Prepare the way.

The thing that really jumps out is that Luke located this event with six different points of reference. He confirmed it six-ways to Sunday, to coin a phrase. There must be something in that, don't you think?

OK, the locations don't help us all that much, since there is some fudge factor in the dates of the various rulers mentioned in the first couple of verses. No one, for example, is really sure who Lysanias really is. The Lysanias everyone knows about (well, everyone who is really into ancient governmental history, that is) was long dead by the time of John the Baptist. So, did Luke mess up, or was there another Lysanias who isn't as well known?

Does it matter? Not to me. What matters is that Luke wanted everyone to be sure of something. And if it isn't the pinpoint accuracy of the date of the launching of John's ministry, then what is it?

It must be that Luke was interested in grounding this whole event in the real world—a least on one level. He wanted the readers and hearers of this story to know this wasn't a "once upon a time" thing, but a "shake the foundations of the real-world" kind of thing. If the Bible scholars who claim that Luke was a Gentile are right, then we can understand this insistence on veracity. For a Jewish teacher, the story was truth enough. Facts are not convincing; truth is. And a truth wrapped in a parable, written in a poem, sung in a song is still true. But for the Gentiles, it has to connect with facts. Just the facts, ma'am. So, Luke says, you want fact? Here you go, "in the fifteenth year . . ."

But wait. That can't be the whole story. It is just a little too vague for that. I think there is something else going on here, something theological. Ah, there's a word that many of us shy away from. But all it really means is thinking about God. All the Gospel writers were more theologians than they were historians, or even writers. What they all cared most about was making sure that we understood something about the nature of God. So, what do we discover about God in these first few verses of Chapter 3?

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas were all powerful leaders in the world at the time. They were emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests. They were the ones who held the reins of power. They were the ones who determined the course of civilization; they were the ones who determined what was a priority, where the efforts would be placed in the world of their day. But notice what Luke does: after listing all these worldly powers, Luke then says simply "the word of the Lord came to John in the desert."

It was like there was this smorgasbord available, this wealth of choices, and God chose "none of the above." In the voting booth of the ministry of reconciliation, God had a write-in candidate. Instead of the ones that we would have chosen, instead of the ones who seemed to be the proper starting point, God chose a nobody in the middle of nowhere. And God told him to get things started.

"Prepare the way." He then went about launching the construction project that would bring the source of real power onto the scene. So, make way, he says, straighten the highway, fill in the trenches, smooth out the bumps in the road. The point here is that there is work to be done: getting-ready work; opening-up work; pulling-the-kinks-out work.

And lest we think this is easy work, Malachi jumps up there at the back end of the Old Testament and says, "Hang on! You think this is going to be a picnic? You think this is a walk in the park?" Not a chance. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me . . . But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver . . ."

Who can endure? Remember room cleaning day? Your first response was always, "It's clean enough." Then mom says, "I'm going to check!" That got a response!

First, you'd try to talk her out of the inspection. Then you would try to bargain with her. Then, at last, you'd admit there was some work to do. Sometimes with words and shouts and grumbles; sometimes by charging up the stairs ahead of mom to get back to work. It was clean enough for you, but not for mom; it wouldn't pass inspection. Who can endure? Going home to that level of scrutiny is scary to say the least, a reminder of all the times you didn't measure up.

Would we? Do we measure up – even to our limited expectations, let alone to all that God intends for us to be? Who can endure that kind of scrutiny? Who can measure up? Who can stand when the refiner comes; when the purifier shows up?

But wait, tucked away in this passage is a glimmer of hope in the midst of the call to cleanliness, in the midst of the warning or the threat. There is a little, almost hidden promise in these words from Malachi to which we need to pay attention. Here it is: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver" (3:3). Uh, hope? Really? Really!

Think for a moment: why silver? Why not gold? Gold was more valuable then and now. Gold gets mentioned later: "refine them like gold and silver." But the silver is still there. Just excess? Not at all – theology! There it is again, creeping in all over the place this week.

Silver is harder to refine. Silver takes longer; the purification process is a long-term one. The one who sits to refine silver often gets burned. The one who tends the fire sometimes has to suffer in the process. You can't leave it in the middle; it has to be watched. It isn't easy, it isn't quick. But it is worth it.

Malachi says that God is willing to be with us throughout the process. Malachi says that God is willing to hurt for our salvation, for our purification. Malachi says that God is willing to endure the fire that we might be made whole. Malachi says that we can endure because God endures with us. Hope. We are not alone.

Maybe "Christmas is closer than you think" isn't a warning after all. Maybe it shouldn't make us feel more frenzied, feel more behind, more afraid we won't be ready in time. Maybe that phrase ought to be a promise, a comfort. Maybe it ought to be an assurance that we are not alone in this season of Emmanuel

because God is with us. Maybe it ought to be a means by which we can overcome the fear of going home.

Christmas is closer than you think! Praise God.

Week 3 – December 12, 2021—The Joy of Home

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#) & [Luke 3:7-18](#)

Colors: Purple or Blue, Rose or Pink Candle

INTRODUCTION

Week three is the time to throw the parties! This is the joy Sunday, the celebration of the gift that comes and the gift we are to and with one another. Let there be shouts of praise and hope. Let there be laughter and joy. But don't let it be simply a surface experience, a pretending all is well when there are many for whom all is not well. But let there be a deep reservoir from which joy can be drawn and tasted. Speak of the joy that sustains, the presence that abides, even in the difficult moments, even on the cloudy days. All of which means we don't force people into a certain kind of response; we simply make an offer – an offer of joy.

How do we do that? We tell stories! Who in your community seems to be a person of joy, no matter what? Who finds ways of celebrating for the oddest occasions? Who can talk with authenticity about finding joy in the midst of despair? They are likely to share that their realization doesn't make the pain go away, but it does give it a gilded edge, or perhaps a new perspective, or the resources to continue. Tell the stories, the deep stories of joy in the midst of your own community. Those stories are there, sometimes you have to look for them, but they are there.

There is also anticipatory joy that is best seen in children. They are trying their best to hold it in for another week and a bit, but it is about to burst out of them. Let it. Let them express their joy in singing or acting or moving. Let them dance during the hymns. Set them free to let the joy be seen in their little bodies. It can't

help but infect the rest of the congregation. (OK, I know “infect” isn’t the best word to use these days, but it seemed appropriate!) Let them influence; let them raise up; let them help put smiles on faces not used to smiling anymore. No, it doesn’t change difficult circumstances, but it is a promise that there is a reversal on the way. There is a kin-dom on the way.

We are depicting the joy of coming home to a welcome that sweeps us off our feet. Even if many of us can’t find it anywhere but here. So, let it be here. Let this be a sign of the coming kin-dom. Remind us all that there is joy in this home. Promised joy. Felt joy. Real joy. Let’s lean into joy today.

PREACHING NOTES

The gray skies and weeping clouds put a damper on the holiday busy-ness. The lights seem swallowed up by the pale glare of the day, as if they can’t quite pierce the gloom. The greenery festooned with red ribbon hanging on the fence is dull and dampened by the persistent rain. And yet. That’s the power of Christmas. Of Incarnation. Of God with us. There is always an “and yet.”

Dreary it may be, and yet there is joy. Underneath and back behind, there is joy. Persistent, transforming, sustaining joy. Christmas isn’t really about seasonal joy. It isn’t about extravagant commercial excesses either. At its best, it is a reminder of the joy that is ours always, a shot in the arm to our flagging spirits, or a kick in the pants to our bored complacency. At least it would be a kick in the pants if John had his way.

John was a pants kicker from the start. He did a high kick in Elizabeth’s womb when he heard Mary’s voice through the waters in which he swam. And he came out kicking, I’m sure. He kicked himself out of the house as soon as it was possible. He kicked it out in the desert, kicked over beehives to get the wild honey, kicked a tree full of locusts for snacks to munch on while he wandered around shouting at rocks and stones. He kicked a camel’s carcass for a coat to wear. Then he decided it was time to kick some sense into the people of God down by the riverside.

I don't know about you, but I always smile a little bit at verse 18: "With many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." Really? There were more? More exhortations? What else did he say? What else did he kick? And good news? This doesn't sound like good news. This sounds oppressive, finger-pointing, name-calling, previous White House occupant tweet level pain. How in the world can we say he proclaimed the good news? Except he did.

That's the problem with good news. For the good news to be good news, it first has to be bad news. John understood that. John majored in that. He was a PhD level intellect in that needing the bad news to hear the good news thing. So, he let them have it. He poured it over them, like the water he splashed into their faces, shouting at them to wake up. He asked them to question their own motives. "What brings you here? You snakelets, still sucking on your egg tooth used to crack your way out of your shell. Still wet behind the ears, if snakes had ears. You don't know what you're doing. Mostly because you ain't doing nothing! Except looking out for yourselves. You think you're special; you're nothing; you're rocks in my shoe, stones I stub my toe on! You're mulch, grass cuttings we leave to be picked up with the garbage!"

Chill, John. Please? Actually, they didn't ask him to chill. They asked him, in a panic, "What then should we do?" And they panicked because they were afraid he was going to say, "run like hell!" or "You're out of luck, bucko, bend down and kiss the grass goodbye!" So, they asked with fear and trembling. But he didn't snarl or sneer. He didn't tell them it was too late. When he answered in a way that made sense, groups of them came forward. "What should we do?" they asked in tag-team fashion. "What about us?" they echoed all along the riverbank. Tax collectors and soldiers asked him. Athletes and film stars, politicians and truck drivers, biker gangs and refugees – they all came in ones or dozens and asked him: "What then should we do?" And he had an answer.

"Bear fruit." (No, not those kinds of bears!) Bear as in carry, as in show, as in live. That was his answer: live! What should we do? Live. But live rightly. Live, he told the soldiers, for justice. Don't abuse your power; don't threaten to get your way, to scare or coerce. And learn contentment, for heaven's sake. Don't keep wanting more and more and more. To the tax collectors, called by some the enemy of the people, he said, "live for mercy." Don't take more than the people can stand,

more than you are supposed to take. Don't rob, don't steal, don't wound with the stroke of your red pen. Care about the people over whom you have authority. To the crowd thronging the banks of the water he said, "Live!" Live in generosity, live in community, live as though you belong to one another because you do. Live as though you are responsible for one another because you are!

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Worthy? As in earning it? If I do right, I'll get what I deserve? No. No, no, a thousand times no. Bear fruit because you have repented. Because you have turned around and are now walking a new direction. Because you now know life and want to share it; because this life you have claimed—this joy from which you have drunk—is not meant to be kept inside, to be kept quiet. You've got to share it. You've got to shout it. You've got to sing it. Isaiah says so.

We don't get a psalm this week; we get a song from Isaiah. Isaiah 12:2-6: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. . . ."

With joy you will draw water – a daily task, mundane, necessary, one of many. Yet, there is a joy in it. Drawing water is about life, about living and sustaining. It is about cleansing, making new, dying, and being reborn. "I baptize you with water," John says. So, you can start over. So, you can repent. So, you cannot be afraid. So, you can give thanks to the Lord. For life. For water. For even a gray rainy and dreary day that vibrates with Christmas presence.

But only if you pay attention. That's the key. Only if you listen deeply. Then you can hear the raindrops singing praise as they patter across the leaves in the yard. Only if you look closely. Then you can see the light that proclaims presence even on the palest of days. Only if you live fully. Then you can taste salvation in the sweetness of the water that flows so freely. We are called, by John and Isaiah both, to be present in our worship and our living – even as we realize that worship is living and that to live is to worship.

And Zephaniah. Don't forget Zephaniah, though almost everyone does. He joins the refrain, sings the do-wahs with John the B and Isaiah. "Sing aloud . . . shout . . . Rejoice and exalt with all your heart!" Wow, he's really into it. He's wanting to go home, to the home of God's promise, the home of hope and kin-dom and peace.

Sure, it will be a struggle, and there is work to do to get there, to even get close, but it is work that it worth it. It is work that is joyful, if we pay attention. That's the call here in Zephaniah, and in Luke's rendition of John's song, and in Isaiah. We're all singing of the joy of home. The home that Christmas is glimpse of. The home that we all long for. So, come, let us adore him. Fully present as we do. Fully alive, as we drink with joy the waters of salvation.

Week 4 – December 19, 2021 The Blessing of Home

[Micah 5:2-5a](#) & [Luke 1:39-45](#)

Colors: Purple or Blue

INTRODUCTION

The story takes over this week. Let's just admit it. The story that we've learned and told and retold, the story that we've sentimentalized and Disney-fied, the story that has produced songs and dramas, movies and poems. And yet through it all, the story persists. The story draws. It defies explanation. It is an act of beauty and awe and is best met with open-mouthed wonder. God, our God, promised to be born in the flesh, like our flesh. It amazes when you stop to wonder again.

That's the blessing the week promises: the blessing of wonder. The blessing that picks you up and sets you on your feet and gives you a new spirit for living. Live that blessing this week. Stand in awe of this story. Let a young woman read the text as if it were her story. Because it is! Go beyond the assigned verses and read Mary's song; let that be the psalm that is read this week, that is sung this week. It is a powerful word, a word of blessing and hope and promise. It is a threat to the status quo, to be sure; but everyone knows the status quo isn't working all that well. So, sing it: "The world is about to turn!" [The Canticle of the Turning](#), written by Rory Cooney, with its lilting Irish tune tells this story well. It is a modern retelling of the Magnificat, Mary's song after being blessed by Elizabeth in her home. The refrain of the song makes it hard to keep still: *My heart shall sing of the day you bring. / Let the fires of your justice burn. / Wipe away all tears, / For the dawn draws near, / And the world is about to turn.*

We are blessed by this promise; we are challenged and given hope by this promise. The blessing of home is the reminder that the gift of Christmas is ours and the world's both. So, bless one another as we sing, as we hear the story. Bless with laying on of hands, if we dare, if the protocols allow. Maybe the family units can bless one another, the couples and the close friends and find a connection to make during the service as a tactile blessing to hold on to. Or maybe, more safely, like Mary, we can ponder these things in our hearts as we remember that we are blessed. From this home, this promised home we call the kin-dom of God, we are blessed. Find a way, a safe way, to remind everyone of that blessing today.

PREACHING NOTES

Micah doesn't like being a minor prophet. He hates the designation, has a size complex, wishes he were earlier in the Old Testament, rubbing shoulders with the big boys, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the ones who wrote so much that people are convinced they were three or four guys, Isaiah and sons incorporated or something. But instead, Micah has to hang out with Obadiah and Nahum and Habakkuk and that goofball Jonah; no wonder no one takes him seriously. It's just seven short chapters with verse counts in the teens instead of the twenties or thirties like those other guys. It's not that he didn't have anything to say; it's just that he got to the point. He didn't like beating around the bush, hinting at his subject. He just told it like it is. "The Lord's coming and the mountains will melt." He said, "the valleys will burst open like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place" (Micah 1:4). A steep place? Best you can do, Micah? Yeah, well, the mountains melted, remember?! That's just chapter one. It goes downhill from there (pardon the pun).

And it's not that he's just an old curmudgeon either. He's got one of those beautiful images, beating swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Beautiful, but wait, wasn't that from Isaiah? Micah swears under his breath, stole it from me, he mumbles. And Isaiah left out the part about sitting under the vines and the fig trees and no one will make them afraid. But no, everyone thinks it was

that fancy-schmancy Isaiah who's the real poet, the real songwriter, instead of him. Micah wishes someone had invented plagiarism during his time.

Then maybe he'd get credit for remembering that Bethlehem had two names. He blamed that preacher, Philips Brooks, who couldn't get the full name to fit in the song so just dropped off the Eprathah part. But at least he got the little town part right. O little town of Bethlehem Eprathah. It could have worked. Then everyone wouldn't snicker at Micah, who they think got it wrong. But no, it was real. Oh, some think Eprathah referred to the region, that's why the translators wrote "Bethlehem of Eprathah." But it was definitely, Micah mutters, the name of the town. The little town. The minor town. The good for nothing much kind of town, like a prophet stuck away in the back of the Old Testament. And yet, God can use you. Even you. Bethlehem – which everyone knows is translated as *house of bread*. But did you know it was sometimes translated as *house of war*? It's like there's a choice to be made: feed or kill; tend or destroy. And Eprathah translates as *fruitful*. Sometimes, however, it meant *barren* or *worthless*. The *little town of worthless war* or the *little town of fruitful bread*. Think about that, will ya! Isaiah won't tell you that, will he? No indeed. Isaiah won't tell you that the one who comes will stand strong like one who is going to war, but instead will feed his flock like a shepherd. He'll be more concerned with fruitfulness than with the emptiness of death and killing. And through him, we'll know peace and will sit secure.

And because of that security, because of trusting in that peace, even in warlike times, even in unsettled times, being fed the bread of fruitfulness, we can do amazing things, incredible things, unimaginable things – like saying yes to a fruitfulness almost incomprehensible in our world. (Like when an angel appears in your living room and asks if you'd be willing to give birth to God.)

Now that, smiles Micah to himself, is something for us little ones, us minor ones to celebrate. God chooses a no place like Bethlehem Eprathah to be a significant someplace. God chooses a nobody to be a significant somebody whom the whole world knows. A young woman, a little girl really, from a backwater town like B-E. Mary is her name. Even her name is common. How many Marys do you know? Thousands. It's not a fancy name like Cleopatra or Jezebel; just plain old Mary. Ordinary young Mary. Except she isn't. Ordinary or plain. She is as beautiful as all

of creation. She is as exceptional as is each person made in God's image. And Mary is made even more exceptional, even more beautiful by her obedience to the invitation from God. Her acceptance of the gift and the calling and the joy that is planted deep within her. And so she runs through the hill country, the region of Ephrathah, the place of fruitfulness because she is a part of the fruitfulness of God. She runs to share the joy. She runs to be in relationship. She runs. "In those days Mary set out and went with haste . . ." (Luke 1:39).

"Blessed is the fruit," says Elizabeth, from her own fecundity. She who was called barren, worthless; that's what the angelic visitor told Mary. That's how the angel described Elizabeth. Ephrathah. Fruitful and barren, opposites contained in one place, one being. Elizabeth, like Mary, is one of the beautiful ones, one of the exceptional ones who said yes, who said, "thank God," who said, "let this joy be to me." No wonder Mary ran to be with Elizabeth. Luke says she stayed there three months. Three months! Long enough to see the impossible birth come to be possible. Long enough to hear the naming. Long enough to feel the blessing. Long enough to breathe the fruitfulness of God.

Do we sometimes give up too soon? Despair too soon? Feel inadequate, insignificant too long? Are we unable to wait for blessing, for fruitfulness? And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, one of the little clans, one of the nothing places, where the bypass passes by and the vibrancy wanes and the lights dim to shine on other towns far away. And you, O little person of your place who feels like life has passed you by and like no one knows or cares if you even are. From you shall come . . . what? Something. Something beautiful, something exceptional. Maybe it already has taken root within you; maybe it is bursting forth from you even now. Maybe it is a love that shines like a star that draws someone from a far place. Maybe it is a grace that blesses those around you in ways that just might surprise you if you stopped long enough to see. Maybe it is a wisdom that someone longs for, someone needs to work around an obstacle in his/her life. Maybe it is a friendship that saves, literally saves, a life. What's within you that makes the children of God leap for joy upon hearing your voice? What are you giving birth to even now as you make your way in the world today?

The all-too-human tragedy is feeling that we are worthless, we are barren, when God has placed within us a fruitfulness that would stagger our own imagination,

let alone the imaginations of those around us – especially those who thought us small, insignificant. The call of the prophets prefigures the call of the one who comes to love us with a fierce and frightening passion, a transforming presence and healing grace. The prophets rage because they carry the wounds of a hurting world almost as profoundly as the one who felt the sharp tips of the straw in a manger as harshly as the nails on a cross.

Micah stirs from under his fig tree and wipes away a non-existent tear from his eye, one he'll gruffly deny ever shedding, even as he straightens his mantle and shuffles off to see what Obadiah and Nahum are up to. He'll let Habakkuk deal the next hand and pray that Jonah doesn't serve sushi again. Maybe it's not so bad being a minor prophet. When you're not wrapped up in so much editing, there's time to hope. And maybe this time, he can get the gang to sing his rewrite of "O Little Town." Merry Christmas, he smiles to himself and to the world he still loves.

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2021—Welcome Home

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#) and [Luke 2:1-20](#)

Color: White

INTRODUCTION

It's Christmas Eve. You don't need me to tell you what to do. Do what you've always done. I know, there is something in you, in the faithful worship team, that says you've got to do something new, you've got to come up with a different way of telling this story. That sentiment is understandable. Week by week, that is the task of the team, the worship leader. How can we repackage this text, this message, this theme so that it will break through the dull ears and hearts of the worshipers? That is understandable, but it is not necessary tonight. See, the new thing has been done. Tonight is about the tradition, about the familiar, about feeling at home in this space. Even if people are there for the first time, there is a familiarity to this night. It speaks to something deep within us, a yearning, a longing, a hunger. And this hunger is best fed by the familiar. Sing the songs you always sing. Tell the story you always tell. Light the candles and hold them up as you sing "Silent Night," just like you did when you were a kid. Just like that.

Oh, I don't mean to be harsh or to draw too hard a line. Maybe there is a new song to sing, a new image to share. Do what seems right in this moment, on this night. But remember that there is an expectation of tradition. It isn't a bad thing on this night; it is a reaffirmation of the promise. It is hearing the story again because, over the course of the year, one has lost one's grip on it. Or the world that speaks denial of the presence of the incarnate one has been so loud that we've begun to doubt, or we have forgotten that this night was the promise made flesh.

Just don't neglect the story. Don't neglect the hope and the promise and the joy in the one who was born into this world of pain with a message of love. Let the story speak this night; it will do the work the word is sent to do. Trust in it.

PREACHING NOTES

Tell the story. That's the best preaching advice anyone can give for this holy night. Tell the story. In as many ways, through as many media, with as many voices that you can gather together or broadcast online. Tell the story, sing the story, act the story, be the story. Your job is easy tonight, preacher. It's about the story. The beauty and poetry and eloquence has already been done; you just have to point. The songs have been written on their hearts; let them sing.

OK, but whose story? Which story? Well, it's Luke's year, and Luke seems fascinated by shepherds. The old tradition is that Luke was a Gentile physician; that's why his story sounds different. I don't know if that's true, but what seems clear in our Gospel text tonight is that he just can't get enough of the shepherds. And angels. And that young girl who said yes. And a baby.

But the shepherds. Tell their story if you can. I know, we are used to thinking that they were lazy, relaxing in the fields, dozing and drinking with time on their hands. We aren't the first to think that of them. That's why they were considered unclean. They were rough characters, kept from proper worship and proper interactions with the "good people." When Luke tells us that the people were "amazed at what the shepherds had told them," we rightly think about the wonder of the story itself. But the added ingredient to their amazement was the source of the story. It was the shepherds who told this story. The shepherds who,

according to them anyway, got a voicemail from God. No, a direct message, better than a telegram, a visitation. A manifestation. An angel, a whole host of them, singing and dancing in the heavens, about a baby in a manger. Uh-huh. Just what did they keep in those leather flasks all night long anyway?

I'm sure that is what went through the minds of at least some of those hearing this tale. These are shepherds, after all. But what if we've been a bit unfair to the shepherds? I read a commentator some years ago who said that we ought to see the shepherds as small business owners. They were hardly the only occupation who had to deal with ritual uncleanness; those rules were almost impossible to keep. Certainly, there were some in the business who were disreputable characters, but what business doesn't have its share of disrepute?

Maybe the issue was that the shepherds were busy. Luke doesn't say they were lazing about in the field. He says they were keeping watch. It was an important job. Someone even speculated once that perhaps this was not an ordinary, run of the mill flock of sheep, that maybe this was a group of the Temple lambs, ones raised spotless, unblemished so that they would be worthy of that sacrifice. It seemed likely that in Luke's mind at least this was symbolic, that the announcement of the child born to be the perfect sacrifice would be announced with full angelic accompaniment to those who were keeping watch over the sacrificial lambs. Keep watch, says the child grown into a man, for you do not know when the day will come. Maybe he remembered the story as he said that. The story his mom told when he was little, and he would sit and soak up every word she said. The story about that night after a long trip to Bethlehem. The night when the stars seemed brighter than they do today. The night when a manger was the only refuge from the dark and the cold.

The night when they came, the shepherds, bringing with them the smells of the animals in their care. And how they told anyone and everyone who would listen what had happened to them—how they were keeping watch, doing their job, worrying about the predators and the hazards out there in the darkness; worrying about how they were going to get the sick ones to eat and the angry ones to live in peace; worrying about the fluctuations in the price of temple lambs, how they used to make a good living but now were just getting by; worrying about how long it was going to be until their next day off, when they could go and see their

families and wash the smell of sheep off for a little while at least, when they could pretend to be just like everyone else.

And then the sky exploded. They thought their hearts would stop beating in their chests. They thought it was the end of the world. They thought they would never hold their little babies, or kiss their wives, or laugh with family ever again. They thought all their mistakes were coming back to trip them up, all their failings, all their doubts and brokenness, they thought what the villagers thought of them was going to be their legacy. They thought they were doomed to disappear into the dark like all the others they tell ghost stories around the fire in the middle of the night, when they are trying to keep one another awake because the wolves are prowling.

As quickly as all these thoughts raced through their minds, came another, fast on its heels. Fear not. The voice spoke in their heads without having to go through their ears somehow. Good news. They heard or felt, or just somehow knew. To you is born a savior. To you, us? they thought. Surely not, maybe the “good” people in town. “Maybe the priests and leaders, the rich and powerful,” they thought. A sign to you, a babe wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger. Now mangers, they understood. Mangers were their business, their language. Mangers and saviors seemed to make some odd kind of sense to shepherds.

Then the song began, and what a glorious one it was. It brought tears to the eyes of these rough and burly men used to the hazards of the wilderness. It made their hearts light, their minds rest, their hope soar. It was glorious. When it ended, they didn’t dare to breathe for a long moment. When they did, they looked at one another, hoping they weren’t the only ones to hear this message. But they could tell by the look on each face that it was real, and it was theirs. “Let us make haste,” they said. They made room in their busy schedule; they made their way, breathless and hopeful, like Moses and the bush, they turned aside to see.

What are you keeping watch over? What will you make room for? Whose story will you tell?

Or what of Isaiah’s story. How would you tell Isaiah’s story on this night? Well, I read Isaiah 9 and heard Katrina and The Waves. No, not the hurricane; the pop group. You remember “Walking in Sunshine” don’t you? OK, yes it was a few years ago, mid ‘80s (‘80s music, gotta love it, right?); but the song was remade in

2005. OK, it's still an oldie, I guess. But it's just one of those unforgettable pop songs that gets in your head and can't get it out. Yeah, sorry, I just put it back there, didn't I? "I'm walking on sunshine, wooah." Gripping chorus, I know. "I'm walking on sunshine, wo-o-oah." Wait, it gets better. "I'm walking on sunshine, wo-o-o-ah, and don't it feel good!"

OK, it doesn't get better. But it is catchy; it is upbeat. The opposite of the Advent mood, it seems to most of us. I don't know why the song came to mind, exactly, but I had to look up the lyrics to the verse. "I used to think maybe you loved me, / now I know it's true, / and I don't want to spend all my life / just in waiting for you / now I don't want you back for the weekend / not back for a day / no, no / I said baby I want you back / and I want you to stay."¹

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2). We used to wonder if God loved us. And now—because of Christ—we know it is true. We know. We don't wonder; we don't wander in the darkness. We know. What better reason for celebration can there be than that?

And we don't want to spend our days in just waiting. Katrina had in mind something else, I know, but I couldn't help but think of Advent. If the waiting of Advent is just empty, just wondering, just "who knows, let's see what might happen; just . . . I don't know . . . just, just." If that's all it is, a distraction, then we don't want to wait anymore. But if our waiting is full of the knowledge of God's love for us, and we move forward living in that love not just on the weekends, not just for a day, but for now and for the rest of our existence, we can live surrounded by that love, secure that the fulfillment we wait for is tasted in the joys of living in this moment. What we wait for is what we already have, but even more confident in the knowledge and presence and joy. And tonight more than any other night, what we have crashes into what we're still waiting for; where the now bumps against the not yet.

¹ "Walking on Sunshine" by Kimberley Rew, Richard St. Anthony Martin, and Christopher Garvey
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The light that the people of God have seen is a light we can live in each day, whether the light is still visible to our eyes or not. We can walk on that sunshine, even on the cloudiest of days. We can bask in that glow, even in our dreariest moments. Advent can be, and is, a reminder of what we already have, as well as a reminder of what once came and is promised again. Isaiah reminds us that though the light has shined, the establishment is still in the future; the authority has to grow so that we can make our way to endless peace. We don't have to look hard to be reminded that we aren't there yet. And yet, there is peace within us; there is peace among us. We just have to choose to make it last, to make it our priority, our vision and our goal. We just have to walk on the sunshine of peace right here and right now. Merry Christmas!

First Sunday after Christmas – December 26, 2021—Lost at Home

[I Samuel 2:18-20](#), 26 & [Luke 2:41-52](#)

Color: White

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday was Christmas. Whew, we're worn out. The crowd will be thin today, most likely. Only those faithful ones who come whenever the door opens will be present. Too many others say they have to tend to their guests or that they are the guests because they went home for Christmas. That is understandable. And we can't really blame them, especially after weeks of saying, "Come Home for Christmas!"

But this is a "life goes on" week. It is a "come down the mountain" week. We go back into the world where we have to deal with the absence as much as the presence, where we have to face uncertainty that lies alongside our hope. We tell the story of Jesus being lost in the temple. The lost child is every parent's nightmare. What have you lost? What have you forgotten, overlooked, ignored? This week is a cold splash of water on a frigid morning after a long night of celebration.

Yet, we don't dampen the spirit too much. We can bask in the glow of the season for a little while longer. After all, this is Christmastide; we're still surfing on that wave.

We can ease our way back into the brokenness of the world around us. We can be real about what we face day by day in this life. But we do it from the confidence that we are surrounded by home, by a community that truly loves and cares for us. The church is the visible sign that we are not alone in this world, no matter how difficult it might be at any one time.

So, how do we extend the presence of home when we leave? When we re-enter the world around us? We can, on the one hand, become attuned to the presence of God all around us. The world isn't the absence of God, no matter how much it might feel like it at times. It isn't our calling to get through the world as quickly as possible to finally get to some heaven someplace else. No, heaven is here; Christ is here; home is here. We just need the eyes to see it.

Where have you seen God at work in the world around you? Tell those stories this week. Tell the stories of preparation, getting ready to immerse ourselves again. Pray those prayers of petition, where we ask God to be visible to us in our world, for God's will to be known in our lives and in our community. Ask for Emmanuel, God with us, to be with us! And then affirm the faith that says we know God is indeed with us!

What habit will we continue after this season ends that will keep us close to that presence? What opportunities will the community provide that keeps our eyes open to the movement of the Spirit in and around us? How can we study together, pray together, share sightings together as we carry home with us into the world around us?

We don't want to lose this, this feeling of home, of connection, of hope. So what can we do to hold on to it, to keep from being lost at home?

PREACHING NOTES

Christmas Day has come and gone again. Lots of activity, lots of stress, good and bad. Lots of preparation and planning. Lots of schedules and events. It was good.

Grand and glorious. The most wonderful time of year, according to some. Difficult for others who deal with loss and change in a season of tradition. A season of excess, which can be good or bad, as you well know. But now it is gone, the calendar page pulled off, to reveal . . . another day. And another. They march on.

We're in the assessment phase now. "Did you have a good Christmas?" I know for the most part that is just polite conversation, intended to get on to the next item on the discourse list. But I tend to overanalyze things. So, I sometimes pause before answering. Did I have a good Christmas? Hmm, let me think. In what terms? Presents given and received? Check. Food desired and prepared and eaten? Check. The right combination of sleeplessness and naps? Check and check. I guess I did have a good Christmas.

And a good Advent season too. The preparation for the Coming and the Eve celebrations as well. They were good. Busy, exhausting, creative, challenging, and good. I had a good one. All around, it was . . . good. So, why the hesitation? Why do I pause when asked the question? Why do I have to consider before responding?

Well, like I said, I overanalyze. I think too much, sometimes. And I think about what it was all about. The call of Advent to watch and wait, to long for a savior, to long for completion, the glory of Christmas Eve in all its declaratory joy, and the quiet acceptance of Christmas Day, where we bask in the glow of the One Who Comes, when we remember God with us. All of that, and more. And while I had a good Christmas, it isn't over yet. We aren't through with it. The waiting and the longing but also the proclaiming and the glorifying. We're still in the midst; we're still on the way; we're still far from where Christmas calls us to be. Or to quote U2, "We still haven't found what we're looking for."

Luke 2:41-52 NRSV "Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover." You know the story. This is the only childhood story we have in the four Gospels. Some thirty years of life is reduced to a couple of baby stories that are just different enough to drive us crazy, and there is one story of an incident when he was twelve. That's it. That's the whole life story of Jesus growing up. It's not terribly satisfying. We want to know more. What kind of kid was he? How did he wield such amazing power when he was barely able to reason? Or did he have such powers?

Some scholars have argued over the years that the purpose of this story is to combat the adoptionist theories of Christology. Some began to suggest that maybe Jesus was just an ordinary person until he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. All those stories of the dove descending, the Spirit resting, it is argued, is when God “adopted” Jesus and then he became the Son of God. Until that moment, he was just like you and me. Not so fast, says Luke. And then he tells this story to show that he was always the Son of God, by birth, and more than that, he knew it.

Jesus’ family made the trip to Jerusalem for Passover every year. Some argue that this was the equivalent of Jesus’ bar mitzvah, a special trip. But Luke says they went every year. This was just another year of going to Jerusalem for the Passover. It was a sign of the truly devout. It was a part of the law that all Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem would come back during Passover. That’s why it was so crowded in the Passion story at the other end of the gospel writings. But not every Jew did. But almost everyone tried to do it once in their lives. But Luke says, Mary and Joseph did it every year. Pretty amazing really. But in one sense, it means that this trip was not that special, it was something that happened annually. Special, of course it was special, like Christmas Eve worship is special. Special, but it happens every year. Special, but not unusual.

They had made the trip many times. That explains the somewhat lax security protocols. They traveled in a group for safety and for fellowship and for shared responsibilities. And usually in large public groups like this, the family grouping was secondary to the community of faith. The men usually led the way, some distance in front of the women, and children lagging behind. So, on this trip, Jesus was twelve, Luke tells us, not quite an adult, but not feeling like a child. Maybe on the way to Jerusalem, he rotated who he traveled with, so that on the way home from Jerusalem, Joseph in the front assumed he was with Mary, who was traveling at the back of the group and assuming Jesus was up front with Joseph. It wasn’t until they stopped after the first day’s traveling and found each other and counted heads that they discovered they were both wrong. Jesus was nowhere to be found.

I’ve lost a kid in a big store a couple of times, once in the neighborhood; sometimes these days even in the house. (I had been known to ask my wife,

“Didn’t we used to have kids?” when they hadn’t been seen for a while.) So, while I can’t imagine the kicked-in-the stomach feeling they got when they joined up that night, I have a vague sense of the panic about to set in. Luke says they went to search. But did they go immediately, traveling through the night, or the next morning? And he says they searched for three days. Was that three days from when they left Jerusalem, including the day they left and weren’t really searching because they didn’t know he was missing? Or was it three days after that? Three days after they got back to Jerusalem. A day out and a day back and then three more? I know that the “three days gone” was a sign of something else, but it does make you wonder. Was he gone five days? No wonder Mary was a bit miffed when they finally stumbled on him in the temple.

You caught that. “Look at what you’ve done!” Why did you treat us like this? It’s like he was doing this just to spite them, just to wound them. Why have you treated us like this?

Pause for a moment here and compare the experience of Samuel. His mom hasn’t lost him in the temple. She knew exactly where he was. She even dressed him for the part. She made him a little robe, a preacher robe for little kid hanging out in the temple. She took him a new one every year and left him there. She was so excited to leave him there, to give him over, this child she prayed for and wanted so badly. But she wanted him to remove her shame. Once Samuel was born, she gave him over to God’s service. She didn’t lose him. She lost herself.

Not Mary, “Why did you treat us this way?” Well, maybe she was lost too. It seems like Jesus thought so. Jesus’ response to his mother is amazing. And layered, I think. At least I think Luke thought it was. “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I must be in my Father’s house?” It’s the second question that has caused the most conversation in biblical scholarship circles. Partly because it doesn’t really say “in my Father’s house.” Some translations have “about my Father’s business.” The Greek is a little vague. Neither house nor business is in there. It could literally be translated as “I must be in the of my Father.” The? Well, *tois* in Greek means the, but it could, with no direct object, be things. The things. I must be about my Father’s things. Kind of like we use the word stuff. I must be about the stuff of my Father. A little confusing, admittedly. No wonder all the effort is on that sentence. Actually, I think any of them work. In

my Father's house in the sense of where God abides – which was more than temple. About my Father's business might not mean he's already begun his ministry at twelve and not thirty like the other Gospels claim. But instead, it might mean that Jesus was always focused on God's will above everything else. Either way, the boy Jesus makes a claim for being centered on God.

But for me, it is the first sentence that is the important one. "Why are you searching for me?" It's our question, not just Mary's. Why are we searching? What do we want from him? Do we want him to come and be where we are? Do we want him to come and do what we need done? Do we want him to not give us reason to be anxious? Or do we search for him so that we can be where he is? So that we can join him in his Father's house? So that we can be about his Father's business? Do we search for him so that we can be in the Father's things? Whose things are we most concerned about this Christmastide? The many things around us and of us? Or God's things?

Why are you searching? I guess the real question is, "Who is lost?" Is it him, or is it us? And how will you know when you find it? Or are found?

Second Sunday after Christmas – January 2, 2022 The Light of Home

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#) & [John 1:\(1-9\), 10-18](#)

Color: White

INTRODUCTION

This week can be a continuation of last week; the Christmastide desire to hold on to the hope of Christmas. Except this week, we go from a position of strength and not of loss. Instead of focusing on the cloud, we look to the light. Light is the dominant image this week. Consider how you will share the light, offer the light to those who worship with you this week. Remember all those Christmas Eve candles? You know you're going to have to get new ones next year, so why not hand them out as folks leave today? We sometimes take them home on Christmas Eve, but what about the second Sunday after Christmas? What about the first Sunday of a new year? Let's cling to the light.

Many communities use the Wesley Covenant Prayer (See *A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 607 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*) on this first Sunday of the year. It also is a way of clinging to the light. It is an honest prayer, admitting that not everything is easy in this life of faith, this discipleship journey. “Let me be full, let me be empty” or “put me to doing, put me to suffering” are words of deep commitment and genuine faith. And yet, a life lived to this model, this pattern, becomes a light not just for the one who lives it but to all those around.

There is a curious mixture of seeing the light and being the light in the Christian life, which is true for all kinds of light. Carrying a candle means your light is shared to any and all those around you. And that’s as it should be. We aren’t to hide our light under a bushel, remember? What are some ways that your community is the light for the wider neighborhood? Where does your light shine? This would be a good week to celebrate that sharing, that radiance.

We started this series with a suggestion that “we’ll leave the light on” would be a good subtitle. It is also a good exit line for Christmastide. As we head to Epiphany, where light is also central, we go with confidence, surrounded by the light of home behind us and around us and within us. But perhaps most importantly coming from us. Let your light shine.

PREACHING NOTES

My wife’s father died after a long and difficult struggle with cancer. Her mom had died a few years earlier under similar circumstances. We had a funeral for each of them, but they both chose to be cremated, so we didn’t process to cemetery and instead waited some time to bury the ashes ourselves in a family plot in the little town cemetery where they lived for many years. So, four months after the funeral, on his birthday, my wife and kids and I took her father’s ashes the nearly two hours to Crumstown Cemetery. It was gray and rainy as we drove, sleeting part of the time, or rain with chunks in it, as my wife says. We didn’t say a lot as we drove, but I know all of us were praying that the rain would let up before we got there. And it did. The wind still whipped across the little open ground cemetery, making us wish we had reclaimed the winter coats, but at least it was dry.

We had the little vault that would hold his ashes, but we were also searching for mom's ashes, which were just in the black box and buried there almost six years ago. We wanted to put them together in the same vault and then re-bury it all together there in front of the stone that had been newly carved with Don's date of death. My wife's brother dug in the rocky ground, and we tried to remember how far down the first box was placed. After a couple of attempts and nearly giving up and burying them separately, we found her, a little deeper than we remembered, a little closer to the headstone than we thought. But we put them together and squeezed the little tube of epoxy that the funeral home gave us to seal the vault; and then we set it in the hole.

Shivering, we pushed the dirt over the top and then re-laid the sod, stomping it down as best we could. When it was done, we stood, shivering in the wind for a moment, unsure what to say or do next. Until my wife, ever the practical one, looked at me and said "Well, say a prayer and let's get in the cars where it is warm."

We all laughed at that, and I obediently prayed. With tears in our eyes from the cold air and the months old grief, we said goodbye on a gray and windy day. We hustled to our cars, shrugged into our inadequate coats, ready for warmth and another drive home. But, we lingered, as though unwilling to release the moment. We stood on the grassy gravel of the drive and talked about our lives since last we were together. My wife had some business with her brother, farm business. I watched her walk over to his truck with papers in hand. Things have not been good between them since their father died. Differences of opinion on how to proceed, how to honor the past and prepare for the future. Anger and hurt, threats even; it is sad. It happens in families, I must have seen it a thousand times, but it is hard to watch from this vantage point.

I don't know what the business was, or what they needed to talk about, but I watched them every moment, in case. In case of what, I don't know, but just in case. After a few moments, I saw her laugh at something. It seemed genuine and true, as if the clouds had parted for a moment and the sun had peeked through. I relaxed, just a little bit.

Jeremiah had a tough job. It was a cold and windy period in the history of God's people. There were enemies without and disagreements within. And as is so often

the case when the prophets were called to speak, the people seemed to have forgotten who they were.

Or maybe not who they were, but whose they were. They had released their grip on the vision that had brought them through a wilderness; they had settled back from the hard work of living in the community that had given them an identity. They had abandoned the law that was handed them and chose to live by the law of convenience or circumstance, the law of every man for himself, the law of expediency and profit, of power and getting even. The law that felt good when feelings were raw.

So, Jeremiah was charged with poking them in those raw feelings, correcting them when they didn't feel like they were doing anything wrong, or not doing anything that anybody else wasn't doing. He had to point out their flawed logic, their self-centered motives. He had to remind them of their failings as members of a covenant community.

Worse than that, he had to point out the consequences. You keep doing that, he would say, sounding a lot like their mothers, then here's what is going to happen. The rot at the center of their thinking would take them over, eating away at them until they were nothing but shells, empty and hurting and not understanding why. They would turn on one another, eating away at whatever dignity they thought they could cling to.

Who would want to listen to that? He was hated, to put it mildly. Tossed in prison, thrown in pits, ignored by most, jeered at by others. His name has become descriptive of a rant of negativity – a jeremiad is “a woeful, wrathful bad-news bearing message or messenger,” says one commentator.

Hardly a source for a sermon on the “Light of Home,” you're thinking by now. At least I hope you are thinking that. But it makes perfect sense to get a hopeful, joy-filled message from Jeremiah, if you know where to look. We are in the “Little Book of Consolation”; chapters 30 through 33 in Jeremiah take on a completely different tone from the rest of the book. It is as if God knew that Jeremiah was wearing out and needed a respite, or the people were languishing under the bad news and needed to hear something else, so these chapters were tucked in here as an oasis to keep us going in the dry and thirsty desert. Our reading for this week comes from that little book of consolation and sounds just the right note.

“I will give them gladness for sorrow.” Gladness isn’t just relief; it isn’t just a grim smile in a difficult moment. Gladness is about joy abounding. In the Bible, the word “gladness” is usually used to talk about weddings. And for the people of Israel, there was no better party than a wedding party. Gladness appears seven times in the book of Jeremiah, and four of them are about the end of gladness. It is taken away; it is ended; it is no more, because of the hard-headedness of the people. But three times (all of them in the little book of consolation) it is a promise and a hope.

The sweetest joy comes in the midst of sorrow. The deepest laughter comes bordered by tears. Or perhaps the most healing laughter, the most transforming joy comes in the midst of struggle and brokenness. It is about trusting with more than resignation and the burden of slogging our way through our own lives, but with the lightness of heart that allows there to be laughter in the cemetery. I will give them gladness for sorrow. It is a promise we can live with.

We’re wrapping up our series about coming home for Christmas this week. Part of what we realize is that home isn’t always easy. Whether it is the homes we grew up in or the home we long for through our faith, we must admit that there are as many tears as there are laughs. But at the heart of any home can be that source of light and love and joy that is Jesus the Christ.

And who is this Jesus? What is this light from which we light our lives and our homes? He is the awaited one, the God with us one, the incarnated one, the one we have been singing about all season long. But how do we sum up this one?

We could read the creeds, those attempts to define this one. While useful, they are hardly adequate to give us this sense of light and joy that we are seeking this Christmastide. Their words seem heavy.

“And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”²

² Apostles’ Creed, see <https://www.umc.org/en/content/apostles-creed-traditional-ecumenical>.

Or even more dense: We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”³

They wanted to try and define him; they wanted to comprehend him; they wanted to nail him down. But they should have learned from the first attempt to nail him down. This Jesus who defies definition. This Jesus who is beyond our comprehension. He defies our attempts to categorize him, simply because once we have him figured out, then we wouldn't need him anymore. This Jesus would become one more thing that we have conquered, one more thing that we have figured out and then left to the side as we move on to other puzzles to solve or other mountains to climb.

So, what is left? We need some handles, don't we? We need some way of grasping, of clinging, even if we don't have full comprehension. Without a place to grab onto, then Jesus becomes another of those incomprehensible realities like black holes and quantum physics that wrinkle our brows but don't really impact our lives.

What's left is poetry. At least that is John's response. When explanation fails, go for poetry. Or for music. Our Gospel text for this week is a song of praise to the nature of Christ. It is a theological doxology. Well, what would you call it?

We could, of course, analyze these words to wring out every thought. That would be a way of approaching understanding. But in the end, it is the power of the words that speak most profoundly. Or if not power, then beauty. There is something here that catches our breath when we gaze at it. There is something

³ Nicene Creed, see <https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-nicene-creed>.

that makes our hearts pound and tears come to our eyes. It may be unexplainable, but it speaks clearly to the deepest longings of our soul.

In this hymn that John has written we discover that it is about us as much as it is about Jesus. Yes, it adds a layer of eternity to the man from Nazareth. And it wrestles with that thorny doctrine called Trinity. (Is He Son or is He God, separate or the same – or somehow both?)

But when the song begins to include us, we move to the edge of our seats. When John sings of the life that is the light of all people, we hold our breath because we have both seen and touched it and have wept for the lack of it. We lean forward toward that light, like a plant seeking sustenance from the sun. We have beheld that glory. And we have known him not. We are both—acceptors and deniers—often at the same time. “Too good to be true,” we find ourselves saying. Too good not to be true, we hope.

We have tasted, we have received grace upon grace, and sometimes it is enough. Other times, we wrestle with the world, with our doubts, with our sin. We do lose our grip from time to time. And we wonder what it is all about. We wonder if it is worth the struggle, the misunderstanding. Don't we all believe the same thing in the end? Wouldn't the world be better if we just stopped worrying about what it is that we believe?

This Jesus, according to John, is nothing less than life itself. Life in all its fulness. Life in all its depth and meaning. Life as we long to live it. We can't be who we are, or who we long to be without him. He is, he told us, the light of the world. But in this moment, what we need to acknowledge is that he is the light of home, our home, where we live and breathe and have our being. He is our light.