

**Home for Christmas: 1. Longing for Home**  
**Zephaniah 3:19-20; Luke 15:11-22**  
**November 27, 2016**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

On this first Sunday of Advent, I'm thinking of home. Having experienced a Thanksgiving where I went to California to visit a daughter who could not come home and anticipating a Christmas when both of our daughters will be with us, it's been on my mind. This is the season when people come "home for the holidays", the time when we see people we haven't seen for months or even years. Kids come home. Extended families are reunited. We get nostalgic – wintry scenes, pond hockey, sledding, fireplaces, hot chocolate with marshmallows; homes filled with laughter as friends get together, Christmas cookies, lights and gifts under the tree. Christmas cards are already arriving in the mail. We pack a whole lot of expectations into the word "HOME" at Christmas time and beyond.

Sometimes our expectations are just about met. More often, they are not – at least not for everyone. There are relationship breakdowns. Or, someone is missing this year. Perhaps someone has died since last Christmas. Or, there are financial worries. Or health issues that have hijacked the season. Or maybe for you the reality of being home for Christmas shatters the nostalgic notion and hope we've carried but never found. In 1943, Bing Crosby recorded the song, *I'll be home for Christmas*. It was his tribute to honor soldiers who were overseas during the second world war but longed to be home at Christmas.

*I'll be home for Christmas*

*You can plan on me*

*Please have snow and mistletoe*

*And presents by the tree*

*Christmas Eve will find you*

*Where the love light gleams*

*I'll be home for Christmas*

*If only in my dreams.*

Kim Gannon who wrote the lyrics said he wrote the final line thinking not of the soldiers but of all people unable to be home. When he first wrote the song, no one would record it because it lacked a happy ending. It was too ambiguous. And maybe that's the point.

There is joy but there is also a lot of pain in this season and that phrase, *I'll be home for Christmas*, may fill you with nostalgia and gratitude or it may fill you with a lot of pain. Your home may be filled with dysfunction, and just the thought of going back there makes you ache inside. So, in this season of hope, a lot of people just want to check out entirely. They dare not even hope. And then there are the people who have no one and no place to call home. Every time I visit Los Angeles the reality of homelessness is everywhere. It's the climate, I guess. But in the relative safety of daylight, you find persons sleeping on sidewalks, benches, doorway – even a woman asleep right outside my motel room door early one morning as a left to go for a walk. Less obvious in this community, but last year Interfaith Outreach served 409 families who were homeless – not what comes to mind when we think of Plymouth, Wayzata, Orono, Long Lake and Medina.

Maybe this season holds too much expectation, too much longing, too much hope and to have one more Christmas that doesn't measure up would be too much – more than we can bear. So we shut out the sights and the sounds. That was Charles Dicken's Ebenezer Scrooge. The love he once carried within him vanished in a broken relationship and bitterness that pushed away any expression of kindness – Bah Humbug.

So, as we enter this season, my advice? Pay attention to your feelings. Your feelings may be symptoms of a larger and more significant longing. It is a homesickness. Home is a place where you're supposed to belong. Home is a place where you're supposed to be safe. Home is a place where love is supposed to prevail. It turns out that our longing for home, our homesickness is something this world cannot satisfy.

One evening last week, when my daughter was working, I decided to walk around downtown Santa Monica. It is an area filled with stores and restaurants, decorated for the season with several outdoor musicians and entertainers. As I was walking, I noticed this lighted sign. It's hard to read in this photo, but the sign lists the special events that will be happening in Santa Monica during December. You can get your photo with Santa, watch outdoor holiday movies, ice skating, a ceremony to light the holiday tree, even a nightly lighting of the menorah during Hannukah. The one thing missing from the sign was any mention of Christmas. A season filled with all kinds of activities meant to instill joy – but no Christmas. And it might be easy to dismiss that as California or the city of Santa Monica – but I wonder, if we might be living at a time when we are longing for something deeper and we are far from home – in some distant country.

One day Jesus told a story about a young man who asked for his inheritance and left home, wanting nothing more to do with his father or anything associated with home. He had dreams of a distant land – and when he got there, when he arrived in the place he thought he was searching for – homesickness set in. This emptiness inside that money and possessions and parties and popularity could not fill. In the process of searching for the one thing that could satisfy, he lost everything. Some of us have been there and done that – or we know someone who is headed in that direction right now. Most of us carry an experience, a relationship, a memory of the past and what might have been – and that experience awakens within us in a way we cannot fully describe. And if they are mistaken for the real thing, they turn into idols. In one of his essays C.S. Lewis wrote: ***“They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.”*** And we find ourselves in a distant land, longing for home. Not home is the sense of physical space, but home in a deep sense of being reunited with the God who made us.

Would it fair to say not many of us spend time reading the book of Zephaniah? It is one of the easy-to-overlook minor prophets buried near the end of the Old Testament. It's about a guy whose name is not easy to pronounce with a message about the judgment of God – and nobody wants to listen to that – not today and not then either. Last week, I read the book of Zephaniah a couple of times – and most of it isn't pleasant reading. Zephaniah lived during the final days of Judah – a time when the leaders and the people had embraced other gods – whatever they thought would bring them peace and prosperity. They were no longer focused on the one true God, but still they assumed what had happened to Israel would never happen to them. Israel, the northern kingdom, had been destroyed by the Assyrians. And Zephaniah makes a lot of pronouncements of woe – he rails against the people of Judah. They have followed after everything but God – and judgment day is coming. But right at the end of the book, we find this morning's reading. It's restoration, renewal and hope – the story of promise and homecoming.

**Zephaniah 3:19 I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame. At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home.** Zephaniah is not naïve. He knows the world is not as it should be, that his people are not as they should be. He knows things will get worse before they get better. But he knows, there will be a homecoming. He knows God will act, that God will come, that God

will again rejoice in his people and they in him. Zephaniah knows God will rescue all who are marginalized – liberate them to live free from fear. Zephaniah knows the door on which they have been knocking all their lives will open at last.

The good news is that we know something Zephaniah did not. Zephaniah did not know exactly what it would look like, but we do. We know the flower and not just the scent, the tune and not just the echo, the home that cannot be found in a faraway place. There is a baby in a manger who gives us clues about the scent of a flower we have not found. The boy and his parents who flee for his life is the echo of tune we have not hear. The one who had no place to lay his head, the one who was misunderstood and mistreated, the one who gave his life for his friends and for his enemies is the news that waits for us. Jesus is our heart's true home, the fulfillment of all we long for. God has made his home among us in Jesus. This is season to be welcomed home.

I often think of those summer days in my childhood when I would leave home after breakfast, searching for something to do. I'd get on my bike and look for one of my friends and we would spend our day in search of some activity that would bring us joy. And late in the afternoon, tired from the day's activity and hungry, I would hear my mother's voice. She would walk out the back door and call me name: "Stephen," she would say. "It's time to come home. Dinner is ready. It's time to come home." I realize now that it was not the food that satisfied the hunger that I felt, but it was a love that would never let go of me. And my invitation to you on this first Sunday of Advent: Pay attention to your longings. Listen for the voice that is calling you home. And if you know someone who is searching, someone far from home – not everyone knows what you know – would you point them toward home?

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of November 28, 2016**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we set aside other voices in the world and in our heads that call you impossible and we ask you to be our Lord and the guide of our lives. Thank you for keeping the promises you have made to us. Thank you for the way you are always available to us. Shine your light on the darker recesses of our lives and help us to bring joy to those around us, especially during this Advent season. Amen.

### **Monday, November 28**

#### **Scripture: Luke 2:1-5**

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.

**Observation:** This is the familiar story that we hear in this season. Joseph and Mary made the seven day journey from Nazareth to Joseph's ancestral hometown of Bethlehem. Roman wanted a census of all the people in order to tax them to fund the massive building projects within the Roman Empire. Mary was in her ninth month of pregnancy, a potentially life-threatening condition in the first century. Would they make it to Bethlehem before she went into labor?

**Application:** This was not a journey of their own choosing. Mary would be far from her mother and perhaps a midwife who would typically be the one to assist in the birth. Have you ever

experienced, or are you experiencing now, a journey not of your choosing? It could be related to your health, your employment, a relationship – or something you know in your heart you must do but do not want to do. Remember, Mary did not go alone. As we will discover in Luke 2, God makes surprising appearances.

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, descend upon the circumstances of my life in ways that will get my attention and surprise me with your presence. Give me the courage to leave what has been comfortable, knowing that I can never leave your presence. Amen.

## **Tuesday, November 29**

### **Scripture: Luke 15:11-20**

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." ' So he got up and went to his father. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him.

**Observation:** A man's younger son wants his independence, and instead of waiting for his father's inheritance, he asks to receive it immediately. He will now have the resources to be independent, or will he? His journey takes him to a place he never anticipated. To be reduced to feeding pigs, an impure animal according to Old Testament law, was a fate far worse than anything he might have imagined.

**Application:** This is really a story about the nature of God. In verse 17, "he came to his senses" and for the first time realizes who his father really is. The son leaves where he was and heads home. It is an act of repentance. What do you need to leave behind (a habit? an attitude? a way of thinking or living?) so that you can come home to a God who is waiting to welcome you with joy and new beginning?

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for giving me this Advent season of self-examination to see the rough places in my life. Help me to trust in your mercy and kindness. Help me to glimpse a new day filled with joy and reconciliation. Amen.

## **Wednesday, November 30**

### **Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5**

Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins! A voice is crying out: "Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level,

and rough terrain a valley plain. The LORD's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD's mouth has commanded it."

**Observation:** These words were written during the time that the people of Israel were living in exile in Babylon. The prophet offered a message of comfort and hope to people who were not where they wanted to be. Although they would not live to see the nation restored, their descendants would. In the first century AD, they heard in these words a message about the coming Messiah.

**Application:** Today, you may recognize these words from George Frederic Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*. Notice in verses 3-4 how obstacles are removed when the Lord's way is followed. How does this apply to your life? When has an obstacle been removed from your path that brought you closer to what you believe God wants for your life?

**Prayer:** Merciful and gracious God, in the words of scripture, I hear your promise to enter the world in which I live. Thank you for sending Jesus to show me the way. Help me to live in this season so that others will see through me the hope and comfort that is found in you. Amen.

#### **Thursday, December 1**

##### **Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-6**

My son, don't forget my instruction. Let your heart guard my commands, because they will help you live a long time and provide you with well-being. Don't let loyalty and faithfulness leave you. Bind them on your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and approval in the eyes of God and humanity. Trust in the LORD with all your heart; don't rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight.

**Observation:** How are we to approach God? That is the question addressed in these verses. God has something to offer me that I cannot give myself. It comes as a result of a relationship built on trust – a trust so complete that it is evident in all that we do. What word or phrase speaks to you from this passage?

**Application:** Have you ever witnessed a child acting like his or her parent? The child's words or actions could be positive or not, but the words and actions of the child might serve as a mirror of what the child has learned from the parent. It is the product of being in close relationship - parent and child. What have you observed as a direct result of being in close relationship with God? What have you left behind?

**Prayer:** Draw near to me, O God, that I may see your path, trust fully and completely in your ways, and find life and hope for each new day. Give me the certainty that you are trustworthy now and always. Amen.

#### **Friday, December 2**

##### **Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-2**

But now, says the LORD—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you.

**Observation:** What word or phrase speaks to you from this passage? The prophet announces that God will redeem Israel and remove obstacles before them. “Do not fear.” These words appear more than 100 times in scripture and are a recurring message in the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth.

**Application:** The words, “do not fear”, are easier said than lived. There is much in this world that prompts fear. We are afraid for others, especially those we care about. So much in life is uncertain. To leave fear behind, we must be able to trust – and not in ourselves alone (Is your trust in yourself absolute?). The prophet wants us to hear that God knows you by name and will never let go of you. What does it mean to trust in what’s eternal?

**Prayer:** In those moments when I am gripped by fear either for myself or for others, help me to hear your still, calm voice of assurance – “Do not be afraid”. Lord, I want to trust you. Help me to let go of any fear that is keeping me from finding refuge each day. Help me to be a calming presence to those I meet today. Amen.

### **Saturday, December 3**

#### **Scripture: Romans 8:26-28**

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

**Observation:** No doubt, God can come across all sorts of things which I would like to keep hidden. But the one thing God wants to find in us above all else is the sound of the Spirit’s groaning (vs 26). At the very moment that you are struggling to pray, and have no ideas what to pray for, just at that point the Spirit is most obviously at work. This is prayer beyond prayer, beyond human sight and knowing.

**Application:** God understands what the Spirit is saying, even though we do not. God hears and answers the prayer that you know as only groaning – the tossing and the turning of an unquiet spirit before its maker. Each day, seek out moments to be quiet enough and still enough for the Spirit to intercede on your behalf.

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, that in this season you remind me that you come close to me and to all the world. O come, o come Emmanuel – God with us. Amen.