

Advent 1: Homesick

Sermon 122 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 28, 2021

Luke 21:25-36

I am pretty sure I was the only one who brought a 24-foot U-Haul truck, two movers (my dad and a good friend), and a house cat to move-in day at Union Theological Seminary. It was 2009 and I was starting work on a second Master's degree that I'd hoped would turn into a PhD in Theology and Ethics. My dad questioned, on numerous occasions, why I needed to bring so much stuff to my 400 square foot Manhattan apartment. He didn't understand why curtains, a new shower head, a butcher block kitchen island, a huge round mirror, two six-foot-tall bookshelves, an entryway table, a futon, throw pillows, and a full set of bedroom furniture were really necessary. "Isn't your semester just 9 months long?" He asked. "Yes, dad, but I'm going to go straight through. I'll be here for at least 4 years, probably 6, I need to make it feel like home."

I'm still not sure how it happened, but somehow we found street parking on the same block as my apartment and the three of us unloaded that truck and hauled all of my belongings and my beloved cat, Bella, up three flights of skinny New York City stairs to set up my new home.

Those of you who helped my family move in early 2019 know that I have a pretty organized moving system, one that involves numbered boxes and a searchable spreadsheet so I can tell anyone who cares to know the contents of any box and the room in which it belongs. Of course, when you're dealing with a 400 square foot apartment, the "where shall I put this box" question is not so important as it can be in more expansive homes. In any case, we lugged all of my home-making stuff up the stairs and began setting things up. At this point, when the heavy lifting was pretty much done, my two movers (dad and friend) sat down and let me take over. They watched as I unpacked box after box of books, décor, and kitchen necessities. As I was unpacking the kitchen boxes, my friend looked up and said, "Wait a minute, did I seriously just carry four boxes of canned goods up these stairs? Can't you buy that stuff at the store across the street?"

What he was referring to, was the year's supply of homemade jams and stewed tomatoes that I had packed away for the year to come. I'm sure there were at least four dozen of them in the truck. No, I didn't make a point to tell the men about it... why would I? But mom and I knew they were there; and we both knew how important they would be as I began to settle in, making New York City my new home.

The contents of all these mason jars couldn't bring me any closer to home physically, but they would give me a momentary taste anytime I needed it. As it turned out, I went through all the canned goods during my 10 month Manhattan residency, and was back home in North Carolina in time for the next canning season. During that in-between time, the time when I lived north of the Mason Dixon line, the only time in my life that I was not a resident of one of the Carolinas, I learned that not only are home canned tomatoes and jams food for my soul, but they were also fun to share and give away. As new friends would visit my apartment, I would be sure to lay out snacks featuring homemade bread

with strawberry or peach jam. I'd prepare soups that used the tomatoes as the primary ingredient. And when these friends left, I'd give them a jar to take home with them... little tastes of my Carolina home on New York's Upper West Side.

It can be uncomfortable, unsettling, and downright disorienting to be away from home for any prolonged period of time. Whether by choice or circumstance many of us experience this to some degree in our lifetimes. Homesickness happens to us all. Whether we are studying abroad, away on assignment or deployment, whether we are temporarily displaced because of a fire or natural disaster, whether we are aging out of our forever home and facing the reality that we need to move into a home where healthcare is readily available, whether we are traveling for business or pleasure, there comes a point when enough is enough, and we just want to go home.

Christians and people of faith face another kind of homesickness when we spend too much time reading the news or living with our eyes and hearts open to all that is unfolding in the world around us. We are well aware that bad news sells and controversy drives up ratings, but despite our best efforts to take it all in with a healthy measure of perspective, we can become overwhelmed with sadness when we recognize the injustice and pain that exist in the world. We can become fearful as we think about the world our children and grandchildren will inherit. We can give in to despair as the problems compound and solutions seem farther off than ever.

We long for a world that *is* as it *should be*.

We pray for change.

And while sometimes our prayers are answered, other times – and often with the bigger, more complicated, more daunting things – we wonder what God is up to, if God cares anymore or if God has completely given up.

These same feelings emerge in the Gospels as Jesus warns the disciples, the crowds, the religious leaders, and anyone who will listen of the chaos that will befall the world. The Jerusalem Temple – the center of religious life for Israel – will be destroyed and the people once again will enter a season of exile and isolation. Even more, the whole earth will wretch with pain and confusion as the sun, the moon, the stars, and even the sea rebel and rage against humanity. Destruction will characterize the days as nations take up weapons against one another, meanwhile all of creation wages war as well.

Sometimes the picture Jesus paints here in this Gospel begin to feel like the days we live in now. A pandemic with an unending wave of variants, a serious climate problem, and even more immediate people problems as we fight and undermine each other with our words, deeds, and complicity. It is no surprise, then, that many believe we are living in the final days.

But then again the claim to be living in the end times is not new to the Christian faith. Preachers, prophets, and other well-meaning proclaimers have been saying it for hundreds, if not thousands of years. In the 60s (not the 1960s but the 0-0-6-0s), around the time the Gospels were being written, many believed the end was near, the destruction

of and exile from Jerusalem being the primary sign signaling the coming apocalypse. Then in 365, 375, 482, and 500 Common Era, there were more predictions of the end. Around the turn of the millennium, Pope Sylvester II and others predicted the end of the world. Pope Innocent III predicted the world would end in 1284, 666 years after the rise of Islam in 618. During the European plague called the Black Death, there were many predictions of the end (that would be around 1346-1351). The famous reformer Martin Luther threw his ideas into the public sphere saying the end would come no later than 1600. Of course none of these predictions came to fruition but the trend carried on.

Baptist historian Bill Leonard remembers his own experience with this kind of apocalyptic teaching. In a recent article he writes:

I was scared; 16 years old and scared. Jesus Christ was going to return at any moment, and I was scared. It was the last night of church camp and the preacher had practically promised that Jesus Christ would return before morning – Jesus by morning! – and in the mildewed darkness of the dormitory, I was scared. Scared that Jesus might not show up after all and we'd been hyped by another preacher trying yet again to scare salvation into our post-pubescent little hearts. After all those tears and all that repentance, Jesus had better show up. I was scared he wouldn't.

*But I was also scared that Jesus might return after all. Scared he would appear with a shout and roll the list of my 16-year-old sins across the sky like credits at a Texas drive-in movie. Scared he'd return before I graduated from high school, and I would have endured plane geometry for nothing. I lay there in the dark waiting on Jesus, scared to leave this world and scared to stay; scared that God would find me, and scared God wouldn't.*¹

Bill's assessment of apocalyptic predictions feels spot on to me. When people – especially people in some kind of authoritative role – claim to know that the end is near it evokes all kinds of fear. Fear that God is coming and fear that God might not.

The truth is, that whether the Son of Man returns today, tomorrow, or two thousand years from now, we are living in a time of in between, a time of exile, a time of wilderness, a time of chaos and confusion, a time of perpetual homesickness as we look out on our world and wish things were as they should be.

Even though we may feel afraid or hopeless or homesick, the Gospel does not let us off the hook. When we are afraid, Jesus does not say to us, withdraw from it all, go home and disengage. When we are hopeless, God does not desire that we surrender to despair. And when we are homesick for our eternal home, for a kingdom that feels like it belongs to God and not to man, the Spirit does not equip us with overwhelming timidity but with courage to proclaim that hope is on the horizon – whether it comes today, tomorrow, or two thousand years from now. We are called to proclaim the hope that God has not forgotten us, that the same God who has a history of entering this world and healing all

¹ https://baptistnews.com/article/apocalypse-now-if-only-it-were-that-easy/?fbclid=IwAR01VD_tnzA5baWTLF8qSXkKOOt0cAQkkU1aZ2L9JzD-Uff9F7MXghbhgxU#.YaFHpi1h1pS

that is broken, is still alive and well and is still entering our homesick world offering glimpses of joy and kindness, justice and mercy, judgment and redemption, and most of all love.

Most of the time we only catch a glimpse, because we are still waiting for the fullness of God's kingdom to arrive, but when we see it, when things are – for a moment – as they should be, it's like a spoon full of Carolina jam, a taste of home in our homesick world.

How can we keep that to ourselves?

When we are fortunate enough to spot the Kingdom breaking through, to get a small taste of God's dreams taking shape, we know that our eternal hope is not held in vain. These small glimpses are like the early sprouts on the trees promising that spring will come after the coldest winter. And we know that whenever the time does come, there will be no more crying, there will be no more pain, there will be no more loneliness, there will be no more hunger, there will be no more war or prejudice or hatred, there will be no more brokenness at all because the whole world and everything and everyone in it will be made new.

Until then, while we are living in the in-between, we hold onto hope – waiting, watching, ready to catch a glimpse, a small taste of heaven to remind us that though we are far from home, God still sees, God still hears, God still cares... and God still enters our homesick world.