11-26-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 Yearning to Go Home Advent “Coming Home”

Where is home for you? Is it a specific location--where you grew up, or where you live now?

Or is home more about who you are with rather than where you are?

For as long as I can remember, my mother’s sisters have always journeyed here for the holidays, for here is where my grandparents lived and retired, and here is halfway between where they live in eastern Ohio and Tennessee.

For over 25 years, when I returned home for the holidays, it was to the Franklin/Middletown area where my parents and siblings live. Yet, at the same time, I thought of home as wherever my husband and children lived.

Have you ever found yourself yearning to go home, yet unable to travel due to health, distance, work or weather? If so, know that you are not alone! Although AAA expected more people to be on the roads this Thanksgiving than any year since 2005, many more were unable to go home.

I can remember three Thanksgivings when we were not allowed to travel due to my pregnancies. Giving birth in December, we also didn’t travel those years at Christmas. It was strange to celebrate not surrounded by extended family. The first year also happened to be the wedding weekend of one of my bridesmaids and I grieved not being with her on her special day.

Those who yearn to go home yet are unable to do so may connect with a classic Christmas song we sang last weekend at the Carol Sing. “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” was written in the midst of World War 2, in 1942, when soldiers could not come home, families mourned young men who would never return home, and young men and women who had moved from farm to city to assist the war effort also were unable to be home for the holidays. From Bing Crosby then to Josh Groban today, the song captures our yearning to go home. Sometimes we can only go home in our dreams.

Our culture likes to romanticize going home for the holidays, whether through song or story or sappy Hallmark movie. Yet most of us know that going home is not always the Norman Rockwell painting envisioned by so many. Going home is not always a welcome adventure if we have families that put the fun in dysfunctional. Going home is not always easy if you have matured from the person you used to be, or you don’t live up to who others expect you to be, yet you are still seen as the young man or young woman from yesteryear. Going home is not always a time of celebration when family members have gone on to eternal glory or families have been split apart by divorce or distance.

For most of us, our homes are a bit of a hot mess. Just like our lives. Just like our society. Just like our world. None of us live a perfect life with a perfect family in a perfect home with a perfect table. And to that I say, thank you Lord!

When we acknowledge that life is not perfect, and home is not perfect, then we can also be honest with who we are now and where we are heading.

And that honesty brings us to the journey of Advent.

Advent is the time of the church year that leads up to Christmas, four weeks that encourage us to prepare for Christ’s coming by admitting our need for a Savior. Advent calls us to prepare for Christ’s coming, first in the manger and second at the end time. Advent calls us to be ready, to be faithful, and to prepare for God with us, the Christ who was, who is and who is to come.

Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. However, they are celebrated in very different ways.

Since Christmas sales have been in stores since July, and Christmas music has been blaring for at least a week if not more, Advent as a season of preparation often gets lost in the hustle and bustle of December.

Sure, we prepare in December—for parties and concerts and shopping and decorating, not for Christ’s coming. Sadly, many of us breathe a sigh of relief when December 26th rolls around, secretly happy that Christmas is over.

When we are so caught up in the season, how often do we miss the reason we celebrate?

We miss the good news that- Jesus is Immanuel- God with us; Jesus is God’s gift of love come to the earth; Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh, God come to us in the midst of the messiness of this world.

Sure, we want to celebrate Christmas, yet we don’t have time for Advent. As Bishop William Willimon once said, “We want Christmas merriment, not Advent longing. The world wants Christmas jingles and the church sings a lament.”

-relgion-online.org

Eventually we will sing *Joy to the World*. Yet before then let us ponder how all the earth is waiting for the Promised One, let us recognize that Jesus’ coming was long expected. Let us remember that Jesus came into a world of sin and despair, a world which today still longs for peace on earth and goodwill toward all.

Many years ago a psalmist wrote the words of lament found in Psalm 80, our Scripture today.

Most scholars agree this was a hymn from Asaph not David, written many generations later than the King in the time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been wiped out by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was threatened by the empires surrounding them. By this time God’s people had turned away from God so often, and suffered the consequences of such willful decisions, that they believed themselves to be a laughingstock to their neighbors.

Today’s Scripture laments what seems like the absence of God in our lives. Today’s Scripture lashes out at a God who appears to be unresponsive to the cries of God’s people. Today’s Scripture longs for God’s presence in a world that feels out of control, in a world that has no meaning apart from a relationship with the Lord.

Diane Jacobson sums up this psalm by saying:

“This lament sets Advent in the context of a real world in which things are not going well.

The world is not a perfect place, people are disillusioned.”

-Diane Jacobson, lutherseminary.edu

Real life is not the cheery Christmas letter. Real life is not perfect, but messy and complicated, full of laughter and tears. If we believe life will be perfect, we will be disillusioned. If we believe that becoming a Christian will shield us from the trials and terrors of this life, think again. That is not real life.

The faithful remnant that remained in Jerusalem knew who and whose they were, yet they also knew how far removed they were from an intimate relationship with God Almighty. In the midst of their struggle, they recognized their sin, and in recognizing their sin, admitted their yearning to return home to God. So now they cried out together, Lord, save us!

Now they finally looked beyond themselves to the One whose stories they still pass down from generation to generation, the God of their ancestors Abraham and Isaac, the God who led them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, the God who guided King David and gave wisdom to King Solomon.

The people had tried to go their own way time and again, seeking to follow a king, seeking military might, seeking earthly wisdom, yet all avenues of this world had thus far failed them.

So once again they remembered who and whose they were, repented of their sin, and cried out to God to save them.

They cried out in lament,

Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

And in such a cry, they found hope.

Now hope is not simply wishful thinking, according to contemporary author Eugene Peterson.

Rather “Hope is oriented toward what God is doing; wishing is oriented toward what we are doing."

--Peterson from Living the Message: Daily Help for Living the God-Centered Life

as quoted by Tom Clawser “The Restoration of Hope” 12-3-11 sermoncentral.com

When our faith ancestors found hope, they remembered God’s faithfulness to countless generations. They trusted in God’s presence in times of despair as well as times of joy. They clung to God’s promises of redeeming grace. When they opened themselves to hope, they oriented themselves to what God wanted to do with their lives. No matter what happened to their land, they recognized that their home was beyond a specific location; rather, their home was in a specific relationship, with God and God alone.

This morning, in what ways do our lives echo the lives of our faith ancestors from long ago?

How many of us have cried out at some point in our lives:

God, save us! God, intervene in our lives now! God, change this world. Strike down my enemies. Come back in a show of force. God, do something. Anything. With your great power and presence. God, save us!

That cry recognizes that our lives are not where they ought to be, or where we want them to be. We could spend all morning here in lament if we simply offered the litany of violence and apathy and despair seen daily on the TV news. Yet so much of the news is out there, distant from us.

What lament do we offer today from our personal lives, our personal relationships? In what ways are we still yearning for a deeper relationship with Almighty God? In what ways do we not feel worthy to claim our place as God’s beloved children, saved by grace?

On this first Sunday of Advent, we are invited into a deeper litany of lament, that could go something like this:

*God, we admit we are sinners. We are not perfect. We try to be faithful and we fail.*

*We have not loved God with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church.*

*We have not done God’s will. We have broken God’s law. We have rebelled against God’s love.*

*We have not loved our neighbors. We have not heard the cry of the needy.*

*God, forgive us our unbelief. Forgive our selfishness. Forgive our sin.*

*God, we need you. We cannot survive life without you, although sometimes we try.*

*God, come and save us. God, come and restore us.*

*God, shine your face upon us, and give us your peace. God, call us back home.*

No matter what struggle or celebration you anticipate this December, know that this Advent season God hears our cries and listens to our prayers. The baby in the manger is God’s response to our cry to be restored and to be redeemed.

The baby in the manger is none other than God’s own beloved Son Jesus, God’s gift of love to the world. So when we lament our sins, when we cry out to God to restore our lives, God points the way to the manger, and through the manger to the cross, and finally to the empty tomb.

God shows us the way to be restored, through faith and trust and hope in Jesus Immanuel, God with us.

Like any good show on HGTV, our restoration will not happen overnight. Faith is a lifelong journey, not a 30 minute TV show. Faith is a journey of ups and downs, of unexpected surprises, sudden loss and amazing reveals of God’s transforming grace working room by room, relationship by relationship, in the midst of our everyday lives. Like a period house being restored while allowing for modern conveniences, wiring and appliances, faith will never take us fully back to where we were, yet instead calls us to become who God desires for us to be, shaped by our past to shine into the future.

Like our faith ancestors before us, we are called to find hope, and a home, not in a specific location, but in a specific relationship, with Almighty God through belief in God’s Son Jesus.

Over these next four weeks of Advent, I invite you into this home with Almighty God, until such time we gather at the manger and celebrate Christmas joy. Yet even beyond the manger,

God invites us to continue to make our home with him, for here and now and for all eternity.

May we come home to God in more than just our dreams.

May it be so. Let us pray.