

Waiting For the Light: The Home We Long For

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

I'll Be Home for Christmas

The popular Christmas hit “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” debuted while soldiers were still away from home in late October/early November 1943. The longing we have for home, and particularly Christmastime at home, is what keeps this tune popular today.

Psalm 80—one of our lectionary readings for this week—would create a similar emotional response to “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” for the first century Jewish person. It reminds them of exile. It leaves them longing for home—even though they may live in the land—it was a longing for Christmas. Even if they didn’t know it.

Home: Places and Faces

Isaiah 7:10-14 explains why Psalm 80 might cause strong feelings in the first century Jewish person. It’s a reminder of when King Ahaz of Judah—the southern of the divided kingdom of Israel—was in civil war with the north.

God promises deliverance to Ahaz, quicker than a child can come to the age where it knows right from wrong, but the problem is—the help comes from Assyria.

This ends up being the beginning of the Exile. The northern kingdom is captured by Assyria, 2 Kings 17 tells us due to their sins. The southern kingdom followed, just a century later.

Though they had returned to their land and come with their people, many in Jesus’ time thought exile wasn’t over. Because as Psalm 80’s refrain says:

3 Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

7 Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

19 Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Make your face shine on us. What part of a face shines? The eyes. Dallas Willard likes to translate this phrase, which is from the blessing in Numbers, as “the Lord look right at you.”¹

¹ Willard, *Hearing God*, 241.

Home is both a place and a face. It is a presence as much as it is an address. God's face felt turned away from Israel.

He Is Our Home

Matthew uses Isaiah 7:14 at the start of his story about Jesus:

²² All this [the virgin birth, Joseph's acceptance of Mary] took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). [Matt 1:22]

Matthew is saying this baby is God's face turned back towards His people. This baby is the end of Exile forever.

Dr. Gabor Mate argues that if you had a baby, and you fed and watered and clothed it, but you did not hold it. That child would die.²

Whether or not that's true, and who knows how you'd test it without being a monster, we know infants regulate their feelings through physical contact. Hospitals have volunteer baby cuddlers at hospitals for abandoned infants for this reason.

Presence is life. It is a necessity to be known, held, and cared for.

Jesus came to solve the real problem. Jesus came to give us the thing we were really made for: Shady walks in the cool of the day with the creator of the universe. Refuge like a baby bird under the wings of our God. Speaking face to face with the one who made the stars.

And it must be Jesus. We suffer when we get no presence from others, but we also suffer when we try to meet all each other's needs. We need someone infinitely loving, attentive, and selfless.

Romans 1:6-7 Paul identifies us as those who *belong* to Christ. Those loved by God. Our primary identity is His attentive and loving present to us.

"Surely *I am with you* always to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:20)

He is what we need because what we need is Him. His presence is bread, light, and guidance. His acceptance is air, it is water, it is life.

John put it another way in his prologue to Jesus' story: The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. (John 1:14 MSG) He made his home with us.

Christmas is a time we remember those we've lost. We sit at tables with empty spots, or perhaps feel alone. But Christmas also gives us something else. It gives us a name translated in three words: Immanuel, *God with Us*. He is our home.

² "The Wisdom of Trauma" Documentary

Be A Home This Christmas:

Of course, for Jesus to take up residence in us also means that He perpetuates His presence *through* us.

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.³

A radical saying attribute to Teresa of Avila, but it gets the point across. When Christ dwells in you, it means He does His work *through* you. To be the place God dwells is a comfort and also a calling.

Paul starts his letter to the Romans, just quoted, with those *called to be his holy people*. His *saints*, the Greek says. A friend who is a pastor in the Lower Mainland likes to say that being Holy is being called up into God to be sent back into the world. It's being set apart to be sent.⁴

Another way we might say it is that those who are called to have the Lord as their home, God as their refuge, are themselves called to be a refuge.

Through invitation to others, presence to their needs, listening to their stories, we can be the home to others Jesus is to us.

Advent: Remembering the Land We Have not Seen

Christmas is filled with nostalgia. For those of us who have had happy childhood memories, we are often trying to recreate those at Christmastime.

But nostalgia often lies to us. We remember with an airbrush.

Maybe, nostalgia is remembering something we have not yet seen.

The fourth Sunday of advent is often the Sunday of Peace. We are nostalgic for the moments when our lives looked like the *shalom*—all creation working as it should—that we were made for. Shalom is the home we long for.

³ Attributed to Teresa of Avila

⁴ Cam Roxborough of Southside Church in Burnaby

Advent is a time we can say “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” because Jesus is our home. We are with Him.

Advent is a time we can say “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” because we can strive to be the home that others need.

But Advent is also a time we can sing with longing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” as we wait for the home Jesus promised us. The New Heavens and Earth. The Land we have not seen, but that we do remember. The land we have not seen but have tasted the fruit of.

So, if you’re disappointed this Christmas, good. If you are longing and hungry for something more, good. Advent has done its job by making you long for something more, for the home we are promised. For Jesus to come, yet again.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe a time you were really longing for home. What did you want most?
2. Read Psalm 80. What are you struck by in the text? What do you resonate with?
3. What is the best way someone was a ‘home’ for you in the past? How do you want to replicate that?
4. What does it really mean to be longing for Jesus’ return?