

**Close to Home: Homesick Hope**  
**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**  
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Today we turn the calendar page on a new liturgical year that begins with Advent, the season of waiting and preparation leading us to the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas. This year's overarching Advent theme is "*Close to Home*". It will be the common thread weaving together reflections on home in the coming weeks.

Last week, feeling a bit homesick, I took a drive past the house that was my home for the first 25 years of my life. It was bittersweet sitting in front of my former home, reflecting upon the joy, love, stability, and comfort of my earlier life there, while noticing the changes made to the house and yard, reminders that this is no longer my home. It belongs to another.

Many people have come into my life through the years who are "home" to me. I have also found "home" in a variety of places where I have lived across the country. It is not unusual to have a divergence of people and places in our lives that we think of as home. Yet, within that complexity of "home" connections there continues to be a longing, a homesickness under the surface that can leave us feeling never fully at home wherever we find ourselves.

Coming close to home, yet not fully being there, captures the tension between the longing and hope of Advent. Emmanuel is with us, and yet, God's promised day- our everlasting home- is not fully realized.

The celebration of Christmas turns us back in time to an event that took place 2000 years ago, while the message of Advent points us towards a future yet to be realized. In today's passage from 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul provides a glimpse into a very young Christian church that is struggling to grasp the hopeful yet bewildering future set-in motion by the risen Christ, whose immanent return they are expecting.

From the book of Acts, we know that Paul traveled to Thessalonica after his release from jail in Philippi. Some in this city believed the gospel message he shared. But others stirred up opposition, accusing him and those affiliated with him of turning the world upside down, by teaching against Caesar's decrees and proclaiming Jesus as king.

Forced to make a hasty departure from Thessalonica, Paul is homesick for these beloved believers, worried sick over what might have become of this fledgling church. And so Paul sends Timothy to check on them.

In the verses preceding today's text, Paul recounts the good news he's received from Timothy. Against all odds, the faith and love of this Christian community remains firm, despite the many pressures upon them to abandon their faith.

That is the context for Paul's exuberant expression of joy and longing in the opening verses of today's text: *"<sup>9</sup>How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? <sup>10</sup>Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith."*

In the final verses, Paul expresses his confidence that God who has transformed the world through Jesus is now present in and working through this beloved community of believers saying:

*<sup>11</sup>Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup>And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. <sup>13</sup>And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Paul gives voice to what God longs to do in and for this Christian community who now make their home in Christ. With hope they await Christ's return while they endure trials and tribulations.

They are suffering for their Christian faith. They are facing accusations and persecution for being disrupters of the status quo and threats to the powers that be.

From afar Paul prays earnestly for them: praying for God's love to increase and abound in their love for one another, and in their love for all, including their enemies. He calls them to be a community shaped by God's love, bearing witness to the love of the crucified and risen Christ to a community that has been hateful towards them.

I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrases of this text in *The Message* saying: *"May the Master pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God our Father when our Master Jesus arrives with all his followers."*

The promise of Christ's return reminds them and us that when he returns he will be accompanied by his followers. This promise brings hope to these first century Christians and continues to be a message of hope for Christ's followers in every time and place. It is the hope that despite whatever hardships, fears, injustices, or uncertainties we are facing, that the future belongs to God.

And so in the *"already but not yet"* tension of our faith: God comes close, making a home within each of us as we carry on Christ's mission by loving one another and embodying God's love to all. While we are homesick for a past that is behind us and for a future that is yet to come, God continues working among us in the present through our Lord Jesus Christ.

My homesick, heart led me this week not only to my childhood home, but also to the church where I was raised in faith; where I first heard God's story and the invitation to take my place in that story. Where I first experienced God's love within a Christian

community. Where I professed Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and shared in Christ's ministry and mission as a young disciple. Where I was married and ordained as a pastor 39 years ago. And where, as of four days ago my mother is now laid to rest among the saints in the memorial garden.

This Advent, no matter whatever homesickness and heartaches we carry or where they lead us, may we be comforted by the One who loves us, who came for us and who will come again for us, the One who dwells intimately with us in the present moment.

God comes to us whenever we embody God's love to one another, praying for and supporting one another through our suffering, grief, and longing. "To be loved by the body of Christ is to be loved by Christ himself."<sup>1</sup> This is the love I see lived out among the saints at Westminster. This is the same love that appeared 2000 years ago in Bethlehem and whose return we await. This love is the tie that binds us together in the here and now.

There is nothing better than waking up in the car as a passenger after a long ride home to realize that the car is turning into your neighborhood and that home is closer than you realized. May we awaken in this Advent to the awareness that our true home in Christ is closer than we realized.

This Advent may God's love abound in us as we offer, welcome, safety and hope to everyone wandering far from home.

This Advent may we come home, to wherever home is found—to live fully with joy, hope, and courage with the assurance that ultimately, God is our home and resting place.

This Advent may God draw near to us and make a home on earth in us, in his church. And may we have eyes to recognize the sacred ground surrounding us and on which we stand.

And so let us say with Advent longing and hope in our hearts: "*Come Lord Jesus!*"  
Amen.

1. **Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**, J. R. Daniel Kirk  
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-1-thessalonians-39-13-5>