

CITY PRES ABQ

Advent Devotional

*Tracing
Christmas*

2021

JESUS' JOURNEY AND OURS
IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Week 1 | Monday, November 29th

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

Revelation 21:1-3, ESV

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Close your eyes. What do you think of when I say home? Think for a second. What do you see?

Do you see — Your house? Your childhood home? Your idyllic picture of home, like your dream home or the Home Alone house or the Father of the Bride house? Is it a place full of life, kids, family? Is it near lots of great neighbors who bring you apple butter and jam? Is it safe? Is it in the city? Or maybe out in a suburb where everything is clean and things match? Is it a mountain home? A farmhouse? A place with land and animals? Or is it a high rise apartment? A penthouse? You want to move on up, to a deluxe apartment in the sky. Is it a place where everyone has their own room and everything has a good and proper place? Is it a place full of people playing games? People talking? Relationships filling the home? What is your picture of home?

When I think of home, I know it starts to stir up these longings, desires...I feel them in my gut. I want almost everything in the paragraph above. I want space and neighbors. I want suburb life and city life. I want a full house and a quiet house. Mountains, streams, streets and parks. Kids playing outside. Safety, security. Matching things and unique odd things. Not a cookie cutter, and, yet, sometimes a cookie cutter, because it brings a house without drafts and lots of things to fix. I want games and conversation. I really like the Father of the Bride house. I drove by the Home Alone house earlier this month outside Chicago. It looked small from the street, but wow, what a neighborhood. Huge trees, parks, city squares...#Utopia.

Woody Allen tells the story of #Utopia in a film called *Midnight in Paris*. Owen Wilson is the main character, Gil. Gil is a writer. His dream of home is the 1920's in Paris. Here he lives in the city, and he writes beautiful and conflicted prose. The problem is...he lives in the early 2000's. He is about to marry a woman that he doesn't love. His writing is neither beautiful or conflicted. He longs for a different life, where his dreams become reality. And then they do...one late night he stumbles upon a cab that takes him back in time. This cab ride places him right in the middle of Paris in the 20's. He meets Gertrude Stein, Cole Porter, F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Salvador Dali, TS Eliot, Pablo Picasso. It is heaven on earth...he is home. Every night he is in Paris, he leaves Inez (his fiancé) for a midnight stroll. He makes his way to the spot, where he catches the cab that takes him home. Here he escapes. He escapes Inez. He escapes her horrible family. He escapes all the troubles of his world and his writing. There's something about home that when we dream of it, we dream of escape, don't we? Gil ends up falling in love with Adriana. She becomes part of his longing, his homesickness, his nostalgia.

She is everything Inez is not. They have long conversations. They think deeply about the world. They don't ever even talk about shopping. Gil begins making plans of a more permanent relocation. And then, one night, while in his #Utopian paradise, Gil and Adriana are transported from Gil's #Utopia to Adrianna's. Yes, she has one too. She wants to go home. Her home is the time of the Impressionists: Degas, Monet, Manet, Cezanne, Van Gogh. She wants to make her home here. And in that moment, we are met head on with the consequences of nostalgia, of homesickness...it always keeps us out there. Scanning the horizon for the picture, for the dream, for our #Utopian home.

But the longing, the longing is right. We do long for our home. We search for it. We pine for it. We scan magazines, Pinterest, Amazon, social media, tv shows, books, paintings, movies, art for it. We dream about big houses and big yards and great neighborhoods and full lives. A place where we can finally be at rest. And not dead. ;-). The longing is right. But as C.S. Lewis says, when you discover an unmet longing in this world, at that moment, perhaps you should be reminded that you were made for another world. The longing is right. It is embedded. It is the glitch in the Matrix. It is the virus in our hard drive. You can't find your home, unless that home is with God. You were made for Him. He is where home is...your longing is Edenic.

This is good news because God is a homemaking God. He sent His Son Jesus to make a home with you and to secure your homecoming. This Advent, we are tracing this longing for home, journeying past the towns, cities and locales of Jesus' birth. We will walk through Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the fields outside of town ending up in Albuquerque. And what I hope we will discover is that Jesus truly is God with us. He meets us in our longings for home, because where He is, we are home. Not backwards. No nostalgic DeLorean ride "Back in Time" to the garden. But forward...to new heavens and new earth. Home. Where God and man dwell together again. #Utopia is God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — dwelling together in the place that God has prepared for us, new heavens and new earth. It isn't our #Utopias filled with people just like us, all in Victorian houses, with green parks and fried chicken and apple pie. It is a multi-national party, a good and reigning King, a kingdom full of people whose best vision of home is dwelling with Him, a longing finally made full and satisfied, a place whose moniker on the front yard reads Shalom, whose neighborhood is full of the presence of God. El Hogar, Maison, Huis, Haus, Koti, Repouso, Casa, Baile, Dom, Thuis, Oikia...Home.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

Father, help us see how that longing deep within for a home is fully met in You. We praise you that in Jesus we have finally found a home. May this Advent be full of furious longing, and may you help us as a church to find our rest in you. Amen.

Week 1 | Tuesday, November 30th

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Philippians 2:5-7, NIV

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Over the summer, our community group took turns giving our testimonies, telling the story of our life and journeys to Christ. It was a joy and a privilege to get to hear each other's stories and to see God's grace in our lives. But when it was my turn, I was placed in what felt like sort of an embarrassing situation, because my testimony feels kind of, well...boring. "I was raised in a Christian home, accepted Jesus when I was little and never left, blah blah." I suspect I hold the Nob Hill Community Group record for briefest testimony.

My hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, is sometimes referred to as Mecca for our denomination, the PCA. It boasts the only PCA-affiliated seminary, and a host of PCA churches, several elementary schools, and one middle and high school. As a child I was privileged to attend some of these schools, which I realize in hindsight was a huge sacrifice for my parents (thanks, Dad and Mom!).

The practical impact of this schooling and churching for me was a deep, consistent exposure to God's word through Bible classes and memory verses, chapel services, and theology that reached into most of our classes in one form or another. My chemistry and physics teacher, for example, had a print of the Creation of Adam from Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel hanging in his room. On the first day of class each year (he was my teacher two separate years), he spoke about the tremendous privilege of getting to study Creation as a means to understand the Creator and His revealed attributes. That's just one of so, so many examples.

That level of exposure to Christianity will either turn you into a cynic or a believer, I suppose. I'm sure there were classmates of mine who were turned off to Christianity, or who just found the whole thing disingenuous, annoying, or just irrelevant. But by God's grace, somehow, it all just wormed its way into my skull and stuck there. *Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. I believe in God, the Father, almighty, creator of Heaven and earth. In Christ alone, my hope is found.*

The thing that seems to have stuck with me the most and is especially relevant as we come to the season of Advent, is part of a passage from Philippians 2 that we were assigned to memorize in sixth grade. We learned it in the old NIV, so that's what I still go back to: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." I was one of the "Smart Kids" when I was in school, and the concept of humility is one that I still struggle with to this day (and probably always will); I guess that just makes me Exhibit A of the fact that knowing and doing can be worlds apart.

But in spite of that continual struggle with my pride, I am still amazed by the fact that the all-powerful God of the universe would deign to reveal Himself to any of us. And more particularly, I am still amazed that He would reveal Himself to me, and to do so when I was a child, before I could even pretend to have done anything to merit his favor. That's an incredible gift that He has given to me, and to all of us. In my case, it was a gift that He graciously gave to me as a child, and it's one that I pray He will give to my son in turn. Because really, isn't that "boring" testimony what we pray for our own children? That God would reveal Himself to them, and draw them to Himself, from their earliest days? So praise God that he came to earth and was made as a Man, in order to draw us to Himself.

-Alyson Noell

Heavenly Father, we thank you for condescending to us and revealing Yourself to a lowly and undeserved people. Remind us that our sometimes "boring" stories are pieces of the Grand Story you are unfolding. Thank you for your faithfulness to us before we can even conceive of our need for salvation and your invitation to such a covenant love. Amen.

Week 1 | Wednesday, December 1st

You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.

Psalm 40:5, ESV

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It is often said that the Christian life is lived in hindsight. As believers, we are invited to remember the Lord's faithfulness to His people. When we look back through the grand story of scripture, it is impossible to not be overwhelmed by the Lord's faithful hand: from creation, to Israel's wandering in the wilderness, to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has been faithfully walking with His people. The same is true in the details of our lives.

I was born a seventh generation Texan, in El Paso. When I was nine years old, my parents decided to move forty-five minutes down the road to Las Cruces so my Dad could open another engineering office for his company in New Mexico. At the time, I was sad to be leaving our home, my friends and school, grandparents and the life I'd known. But hindsight reveals how much my life changed because of that one decision.

If you were to ask me now where I am from, I'll usually say, "I was born in El Paso, but I claim Las Cruces." Because of that move, I can now see all the beautiful details of how God drew me to Himself. Ready for this fun adventure down the rabbit hole? The friendships I made in middle school would give me connections my freshman year of high school with the Student Venture club (Cru's high school ministry). Through my involvement there, I'd be immersed in a Christian community for the first time in my life. God was wooing me and on a gym floor, and at a Student Venture conference that following summer, Jesus saved me. The deep love for Las Cruces and its people, my family, and the helpful scholarships offered, I attended New Mexico State for college. God used those years to give me more time with my parents, brother, and grandmother before she passed away. God used the people of a Presbyterian church and a girl's bible study through RUF, to encourage, challenge, and deepen my faith. The summer after my freshman year of college, the daycare I worked at closed. I found myself job hunting, which led my Aunt and Uncle to invite me to come to Phoenix to work at my Uncle's Baskin Robbins Ice Cream store. I decided to attend a college bible study and met my husband in his parent's kitchen, where the Bible study was held.

The intricate web of decisions and their impact could go on, all because of my parents' choice to move us to a little town down the road.

When we visit now, I often walk in the desert behind my parents' home with the Organ Mountains in the distance and I marvel at this little corner of the world that shaped me. In one of his first letters to me during our long-distance dating, my husband wrote Psalm 40:5 at the end: "You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told." This has become our family verse. It is engraved on our wedding bands. I truly cannot count the ways He has been faithful to me in the details of my life. Marvel with me, friends, at His beautiful

story for us. Marvel with me this advent season at the wondrous details of Christ's birth. Remember His faithfulness.

-Bronwyn Siebert

God, we pray, this advent season, You would help us to marvel and wonder and recount the beautiful way Jesus entered this world. Help us remember and find deep encouragement in recalling your faithful works in our lives. Thank you for loving us, for coming to us, for changing us. We see your hand in the details and thank you for the baby in the manger who was born to die for us. Amen.

Week 1 | Thursday, December 2nd

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith----and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God---not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV

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Tyler, Texas is known as the Rose Capital of the World, set deep in the Piney Woods of East Texas. It is both Texan and Southern, about halfway between Dallas and Shreveport, Louisiana. Growing up in Tyler, I often heard people say that we were not just the Bible Belt, but the “Buckle of the Bible Belt.” When you meet someone new in Tyler, one of the first questions you ask is where they go to church. If you go to a business lunch, the person you are eating with will most likely pray with you before the meal. This assumption of faith, the plethora of evangelical churches, camps, youth groups, and Christian schools (as I attended), created a culture where kids like myself growing up there in the 80s and 90s felt pressure to be “good Christian kids” that never doubted God, never questioned why bad things happened, and if we stepped outside of the moral expectations laid out in this culture we felt deep shame and wanted to hide or run away. I never met an atheist, Muslim, Hindu, Mormon, or Jewish person in Tyler. Every single person in my world was an evangelical Christian. And most were middle and upper middle class white people. Women in Bible studies loved prayer request time because they could share gossip couched as “prayer requests.” One might say, “I heard Linda’s teenage daughter is pregnant, bless her heart, we better pray for her.” And that’s where the care for this friend would end, with gossip rather than grace.

My parents were believers that (to their credit) did not put this pressure on me. However, it was there in my Christian school, youth group, camp, friendships, and elsewhere. My school gave out awards to kids for having good Christian character. The language used around town was littered with Christian-ese. When things went well, one would say it was a “God thing.” If someone made a decision in life, they would tell others that God told them to break up with their boyfriend, go to a certain college, or buy a new house. In church, and at school, chapel worship was often a production with lights, multiple musicians, and a crowd filled with teens raising their hands and closing their eyes. From early childhood I was taught at church and school to memorize scripture, I sang Christian songs, I learned all the books of the Bible. I was prayed for by family, friends, and teachers.

I became a Christian at a young age, and throughout my childhood experience in East Texas, I grew to love Jesus and felt his love for me. I had wonderful Christian friends that encouraged me to love God and others. There were many benefits to growing up in a place saturated with Christianity. And at the same time, I never fully felt like it was for me. I didn’t always feel comfortable raising my hands in a worship service, I cringed when I heard gossipy prayer requests, I wanted to meet people that didn’t look and act just like me, and I dreamed of exploring new places. Although I felt comfortable and happy with my life, I also felt deep down that change would be good.

I went to college at Texas Tech University, a seven-hour drive across Texas from Tyler. Although still predominantly evangelical Christian, it was a large public university, serving students and professors from across the state and the world. I encountered many more people during this time that believed different than me, that grew up in different types of homes, or even in other parts of the world. I also got involved in Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), the campus ministry of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). I began to learn more about Reformed teachings. There was no big moment of change or awakening, but there was a realization that this is what I have always believed to be true, that we are all sinful people that are saved by Grace Alone, by Faith Alone, in Christ Alone. All of the extra fluff, the music, the rules, the pressure, were things humans added to Christianity over time. Those things were not bad in and of themselves, but in many cases did become tainted by sin.

It's easy now to look back at a place like Tyler with cynicism. I can often find myself thinking of "those narrow-minded evangelical Christians in East Texas," and think that I am so much better off now with my intellectual, open-minded Christianity, my diverse friend group, and my public school kids. But the reality is, when I do that, I am not believing in Grace Alone, by Faith Alone, in Christ Alone. I am adding my own values and definitions of what it is to be a Christian, just like all the "good Christian folks" in Tyler.

One of the many verses I memorized as a child was Ephesians 2:8-9. Most people who grew up in the church memorized it as I did, but I did not fully grasp the meaning of it. Now I see the gift that was given to me, a self-righteous "good Christian girl," in 1990s Tyler, and me, the self-righteous, "open-minded, diverse, cultured, middle aged woman" in 2021 living in Albuquerque. Both versions of myself can only be saved by the beautiful gift of a Savior sent first as a baby born in Bethlehem. Thanks be to God.

-Chelsea Collins

Lord, make us aware of all the ways we attempt to add to salvation by our works. Bring us back to the truth of our sin and our absolute need for you. Humble us, so that as we exist in circles of fellow believers, or in places of great diversity of beliefs, that we might walk forward in the light of the Gospel, not finding ourselves better than others, or more able to access salvation than others. Allow our preconceived notions from our hometowns to propel us into greater grace. Amen.

Week 1 | Friday, December 3rd

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Luke 19:10, ESV

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I grew up in Harriman, Tennessee. It was a sleepy little southern Appalachian town situated between Walden Ridge and the Emory River. Being in the Bible Belt of the southern USA, there were many churches. The total population in the 50's and 60's was around 12,000.

My family was at First Presbyterian Church (Northern Presbyterian) every time the doors were open. I was an only child and was always looking for other children to play with. So I was also at the church building as a Cub Scout and later as a Boy Scout. My parents kept me going to Sunday School and Youth Group also. Whenever there were revival meetings or special joint worship of the churches in the city, my parents were always there with me in tow.

So growing up in that environment, I learned a lot of Bible facts, but in those years that knowledge never went very deep. I went to the confirmation class as a young teenager and formally joined the church. But I really did not understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. I thought it meant following the rules of the Bible and never disobeying God. One also needed to celebrate Christmas and Easter in a proper holy way to be a good Christian.

Christmas was always fun. We would always go out of town to look for a nice Christmas tree on land owned by family friends. That was always fun. Decorating the tree was fun with having lights, strings of popcorn, strings of cranberries, and topped off with artificial snow in spray cans. As a child, I was always excited by the special foods, lots of sweets, and extra celebrations with neighbors and friends. We would make day trips to visit my mother's family in rural Bell County, Kentucky and my father's relatives in rural Knox County, Tennessee.

Churches were numerous and opportunities to learn the Bible were everywhere. As I got into the teenage years and involved in High School sports, the influences around me drew me into a thrill seeking kind of life. I played football from age 6 through 18. Especially on my high school team, my friends and I became wilder and wilder as we got older.

In my senior year in high school, the football booster club brought in new coaches that had been graduate student coaches at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. One of them had been a star running back from 1961-64. The other was an outstanding offensive lineman. The two brought something else with them that no one expected. They were passionate about following Jesus.

I wanted to be good at and play football badly. You could say it was my first love. I saw in John Paty and Rex Dockery, two men who were great coaches. But they were also passionate about knowing Jesus. It was a different kind of Christianity that got my attention, even though I was not yet ready to embrace it at that time.

My coaches raised money for me to go to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes Camp in the mountains of North Carolina. There I heard NFL players like Jerry Stovall and others give testimonies through tears about how Jesus had met them in all their successes and brokenness. Christ had used their personal struggles to convict them and draw them to his forgiveness.

Back home in Harriman TN, these two coaches worked to get me college scholarships in football that would have paid most of my tuition. I foolishly turned down those offers (I can say that now) to pursue a thrill-seeking path that eventually broke me spiritually. Seeing my moral and spiritual inability opened me to my need for change that I was incapable of making happen. I was headed toward a debauched life. Only God's intervention through new friends and His Word, rescued me from tumbling headlong into that pit.

The journey to knowing Christ began in Harriman, TN by learning Bible facts as a child, seeing the Scripture lived out in the lives of athletes and coaches that I deeply respected. That history was what God drove me back to as I saw the emptiness of chasing the world.

-Dan Herron

Jesus, thank you for coming after us even before we realize that we have the need. We praise you that your seeking is to draw not only those who have lost their way, but to work in our hearts so that we want to be found by you. Blessed be your name! Amen.

Week 2 | Monday, December 6th

The Lord is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His works.

The Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.

Psalms 145:17-18, ESV

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I am from the Q, the Burque, the Duke City, A-B-Q, the 505, Albu-quirky. I was born at Presbyterian hospital on Central Ave. to teenage parents. This is my hometown. And it is my home now. It's my kids home. My wife's. As a kid, I really didn't think much about it. I mean, Albuquerque was weird cause of its spelling - I mean, two Q's, three U's (don't forget that first one or that R for that matter). It was distinguishable, because of Bugs Bunny. "I think I took a wrong turn in Albuquerque." Otherwise, it was just home. I mean, we had the Dukes - The Dodgers triple A farm club. My childhood was orientated around them. I went to every game I could. I was proud of them. Maybe the Lobos too. Not football Lobos, mind you, but basketball Lobos. We did have the Pit — put on the map in 1983, when Jim Valvano's NC State Wolfpack upset the Houston Cougars on a last second shot by Lorenzo Charles. There are those iconic shots of Jimmy V, stunned and shocked by the win, running around on our home court looking for someone to hug. What else? Well, not a lot. Maybe Zias and green chilis...the mountains...the sun. Years later, of course, Breaking Bad made us famous again. I mean, maybe just famous-er, or maybe before we were almost famous and now with the internet and streaming tv - actually famous. But really, as a kid. It was really just home.

It was home because it was the place where all my family was. I mean all of them. Grandparents, great grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles, step-grandma's and step aunts and uncles — all of them. My dad had family back east, near Philly. But that was really the only family I knew of not in the Q. My life revolved around this family, my neighborhood at Tramway and Lomas, where there were kids my age and motorcycle trails to explore and my church — Temple Baptist at San Pedro and Constitution. This was home. There were good things and bad things about it. I wasn't scared of crime as much as the canyon winds that made the branches of the pine tree scratch my window. I was a little scared of Monty McDuffie, the neighborhood bully. I was definitely scared of my mom's meatloaf, which she seemed to love to torture me with. Otherwise, I always felt safe. Oh, wait, there were ditches - lots of them. And we were told relentlessly to stay away. I also oddly was terrified of tornados. Did we get them or any other natural disaster in the 505? Not hardly. So other than meatloaf, Monty McDuffie, windy nights and tornados, the Q was safe and full of good things.

The good things were Christmas eves and mornings, and 4 different present openings, Sunday lunch at Furr's, Mile High Little League, lots of open space to ride and play in and Honey Bear Toys in Coronado Mall where my dad was the manager, oh and Temple Baptist Church. I went to church here from the first day, and eventually went to school here. Many of my friends were here. And in some ways, I learned about God here. I say some ways, because it wasn't always the God of the Bible that was preached here. There were lots of rules and things that were given the major key here. But I did first believe in Jesus here, not here as much as Singing Hills Youth Camp in the East Mountains, but still here. I was saved here and years later called into ministry

here. Here in the A-B-Q, I was first baptized. I took the Lord's Supper, once a year here (yes I said once a year - some Baptists are weird about not appearing remotely Catholic), and I did learn about aspects of who God was here both at church and school. My parents helped reinforce my faith here. So I guess, the Burke pushed me towards God. It was the backdrop of where I would learn to love God, full of mostly good things. I don't take that for granted because I know that isn't everyone's story of here.

There's a Brooks and Dunn song called Red Dirt Road. In it, the boys sing about their home at the end of a Red Dirt Road: "it is where they drank their first beer, where they found Jesus, where they learned the path to heaven is full of sinners and believers." The Duke City has been that for me. It has been home, and it has been the place where God drew me to Himself and the place now where God is working in my own kids on the streets and places where I walked. This is God's kindness to us, that he works in and through people and places to help us call out to him. It is his kind providence. Hidden, yet lurking always. This is a beautiful thing, and I'm thankful for God working His life into mine through my hometown.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

Father, thank you for all the things that you used unbeknownst to me to draw me to yourself. I'm thankful for this city. Amen.

Week 2 | Tuesday, December 7th

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say, "I am going away, and I will come to you."

John 14:27-28a, ESV

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The first house I called home sat out on a little manmade reservoir, stocked with fish, attracted snakes, surrounded by kudzu that made it look more like a jungle than the deep south of Mississippi. It was in that place that I spent my days swinging on my red metal swing set overlooking the lake, feeding the ducks moldy bread, picking the daffodils from my neighbor's yard, "gardening" in the front flower beds with my mom, and playing baseball with Daddy, our four big trees marking each base. The neighborhood was filled with a good mix of young families with kids right around my age, and elderly folks rearing to buy my girl scout cookies every spring. I always felt like I lived in the best place in the world – serene, peaceful, the perfect sloped driveway for rounds and rounds of contemplative rollerblading rides.

On that same driveway, I can still picture the day a policeman was walking down, in full uniform, with his patrol car up on the street. I'm sure the neighbors were peering through curtains and blinds to know what had disrupted the tranquility. I watched from the back window of our minivan parked in the garage as he explained something to my mom with furrowed brow and made my mom gasp and break down in tears.

It was only a week or so later that there wasn't even a glimmer of the peace that rose up with the mist off the lake every morning. The house was crammed full of floral bouquets, people sitting on things that weren't furniture, and some even moving furniture out of the house to fit more people (most of whom I'd never met), food for the freezer and food for the fridge and food for every square inch of counter space we had. I stayed in my room, hiding on my top bunk, blankets pulled over head, searching for the peace of home I had known.

After losing my dad, I no longer understand home as a place of peace. And ever since, there's been an anxiety to follow, specifically surrounding my home.

My anxiety has laid dormant most of my life, with only a small pulling of thoughts here and there, until it resurfaced in big waves in 2017 and brought some paralyzing moments of panic while alone in my home. It took time to be honest about how debilitating it had become before going to see a counselor. In my counseling sessions, we worked through a timeline of my life, placing events and emotions to pinpoint all of the reasons why I can't feel safe in my home, why I can't find peace while alone like I know I had on that little lake in New Albany.

Finding songs and Scripture and even certain scents that can draw me back to reality when anxiety is setting in, I've found that I will probably never arrive at that same place of lasting peace in a physical house again. I know too much. I've experienced how unsafe this world is firsthand. And so the Lord has been teaching me to make Him my Home.

When I call on His peace to meet me in my panic, He responds with flashbacks and reminders of His faithfulness to me. Even through those tumultuous times of anxiety surfacing, or seasons of just straight lament and grief, He has sustained me, prepared a place for me, and promised me more.

The Advent season reminds me that He didn't quite fit in this world, being born in a place with no room, sheltered with animals and all of their stench. Coming to a world so unsafe, so anxious for rescue, so riddled with disturbances to the tranquility. And still He came. And still He promises to return.

Home is not in these walls. And home is not being free from anxiety because I've managed to control my fears with all my manmade comforts. And home is not forgetting the trauma that's occurred.

Home is the comfort of my Savior's arms that didn't promise me this life, but promised me the next in which I'll be walking in the peace of my Home forever.

-Emily Spare

Heavenly Father, we wait for the Home you offer, full of peace, our true restoration, and our future glory. We want to be with you there, secure from the troubles of this world. In this Advent season, we stand in the tension of proclaiming, "God has come," and, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Comfort us in knowing that in the tension between those proclamations is your peace everlasting. Amen.

Week 2 | Wednesday, December 8th

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:13-16, ESV

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Growing up, I had no idea how atypical my hometown was. I was less than three months old when we moved to Boulder, Colorado in the mid-1980s. In broad strokes, people who lived in Boulder were white, liberal, fit, outdoorsy, well-educated, into organic food before it became popular, upper middle-class, and non-religious. The divinity of being outdoors while pushing one's body, the importance of social activism, notable careers after attending Ivy Leagues, and tolerance were the town's predominant beliefs. CU Boulder was and still is a party school and the atmosphere of experimentation and freedom trickled to my high school that was just down the hill from the university. Growing up in a fit, moneyed college town with several national laboratories and technology companies led to a narrow view of "the good life" - a physically fit body, keen mind, impressive career, effortless wealth, and tolerance of all belief systems.

In the midst of this town, with one of the only Buddhist-inspired universities in America, a few churches thrived. My mother took me and my two sisters to church every week; I was about twelve when my father became a Christian and began joining us on Sundays at the church we attended, one of the largest in Boulder. Its strong middle and high school ministries were instrumental in fostering friendships with other Christians my age and provided a biblical strong foundation to help withstand the pressure of living in such a secular environment.

In Boulder, faith in Christ was the exception, not the norm. I needed to have a level of conviction in the one true God that I have not needed since I moved away after high school. While I had Christian friends at church, very few of them went to the same schools as I did. Being one of the only Christians I knew in school meant I often felt on the outside when my decisions did not align with others. There were times I wondered if I was just missing out on fun.

As we are called to be salt and light in the world so that others may see God, repeatedly choosing to live in ways called by God was noticed by others. While I felt on the outside, I learned later that others saw the light of God in me and it both challenged and encouraged them. Internally, I often prayed the DC Talk song, popular around that time, that says:

Tell me what's going on inside of me
I despise my own behavior
This only serves to confirm my suspicions
That I'm still a man in need of a Savior
I wanna be in the Light

As You are in the Light
I wanna shine like the stars
In the Heavens
Oh, Lord be my light
And be my Salvation.

God answered my prayers of need for a Savior and grew my faith so His light shone.

-Elizabeth Biersgreen

Lord, let your light transform us so that we desire to serve you and shine your Son in the dark places you have called us. Sustain us and give us a community as we walk in your ways. Amen.

Week 2 | Thursday, December 9th

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Psalm 90:1-2, ESV

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Our task this advent was simple: write about your hometown, and how God used it in your life. The problem is, I don't have a hometown. I've lived in many places: Toronto, Canada; Miami, Florida; Cleveland Heights, Ohio; Waukesha, Wisconsin; Wexford, Pennsylvania; Cedarville, Ohio; Ithaca, New York; Tonawanda, New York; Albuquerque, New Mexico. But not one of those places springs to mind when I hear the word "hometown". What makes a place a hometown? Birth? Where I started school? Formative childhood years? Coming of age? First real job? Duration of residence? As of a few months ago, I've now lived in Albuquerque longer than anywhere else in my life (at least as far as continuous residence).

So instead, I'd like to tell you about the experience of not having a hometown, and how God has made Himself known to me in that experience.

Growing up, moving was a fact of life. Every so often my family would pack up everything in a swirl of chaos and the next thing I knew, there was a new house and new friends and new church. As with most young children, my identity was tied up in my immediate family; because they moved with me, there was no sense of crisis. As I grew older, that started to change. I started making close friends and was old enough to know that moving meant I wouldn't see them again. I loved my house and our five acres of land and the idea of leaving made me feel like I was leaving a piece of me behind. That move, when I was 10, was by far the worst. As we drove away for the final time one evening, I gritted my teeth and repeated to myself, "It's just a place. It's just a place. I'll never fall in love with a place again, so I can't be hurt like this."

And I didn't. Or more specifically, I didn't let myself. I avoided attachment and even as I made new friendships and learned new routines, I saw them as temporary. I kept an emotional distance, and made very few close friends. Many of my classmates in high school had lived their entire lives within a few miles of their birthplace, and I looked at them with a mixture of jealousy and bewilderment at their sense of "rootedness".

So how was God at work in all this? At some point, I gradually started to come to the realization that my pattern of detachment was part of a larger attempt to protect myself by being completely self-sufficient. I didn't want to rely on other people I'd move away from soon, and I didn't want to rely on God either. And it wasn't working. I had believed in Jesus at a young age, but it was (and still is) a hard-fought battle to learn to rely on him, not just for my salvation, but for daily life. And if Jesus is truly at work in my day-to-day life, then he put me in a particular place, at a particular time (however short) for a reason. I learned to take to heart God's instructions to the Israelite exiles in Jeremiah 29:5-7: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” In other words, invest in the place you live and the people you’re with, no matter how temporary, because that is how God works: Both to bless me, and through me to bless those around me. So when I find myself in a new location, I seek to immerse myself in it. I celebrate the unique ways in which God’s glory is displayed in its diversity and culture, I get involved in a local church as quickly as possible, and I try to find things I can truly enjoy and appreciate about that new place rather than focusing on its problems or longing for somewhere “better”.

But there’s another lesson that God has been teaching me at the same time. Each time I feel uprooted and torn, each community I leave behind, and each disappointment about what is lacking in the new place reminds me that none of these places are my true Hometown. As a child of God I don’t belong here. My identity is in Jesus Christ, and just like when I was a small child, I don’t need to worry about leaving because no move can tear me away from him. He is my home, now and eternally.

-Joanna Hinks

God, in this season of waiting and longing, teach me to long for my true home even as I practice contentment where You have placed me. Let me be blessed and a blessing to others in my community, but remind me that my identity is in You and only in You can I find all that I need. Amen.

Week 2 | Friday, December 10th

And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

Genesis 13:10-12, ESV

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I have been fortunate to travel a decent amount in my life. I did a test on Facebook a while back about famous American sites to visit and of the 150 spots, I had hit well over half, placing me in the top 80% of people. I have stepped foot in 48 of the 50 states and several foreign countries.

One summer, I took a team of college students deep into China. I was gone from Danette and my then 3 young kids for 21 days and nights. As I made my way home, I was homesick. I felt this intense longing to be home and I had this foreboding sense that I wasn't going to make it. There was a rupture in my feelings toward home.

My flights were arranged such that I would have a full day and a half in Hong Kong before returning home. But when I landed in HK, I immediately attempted to get on an earlier flight that would get me home ASAP. I had no luck, and that day and a half seemed like a week. I was anxious and full of this longing to be home, safe and secure, to be with my lot...my people...to be home. I didn't sleep well my last night, so I took Ambien for the flight home, because I didn't know how well I could bear sitting on this 13 hour flight awake, with this longing, and these fears.

I felt like Odysseus...longing for home, my son then 4, my daughters 2 and 3, awaiting my return. Telemachus was Odysseus' son. He defended his mother from would-be suitors while his father was away for 10 years. While they were waiting, He laments, "How I wish I could have been rather son to some fortunate man, whom old age overtook among his possessions." Telemachus senses the privilege of belonging to a place that serves as a witness to our birth and the spectator of our death and understands home is the place for belonging, being known, being recognized, received, and remembered.

And Missed...

Home in the face of death or fear or fear of death is a perceived stability, a hedge of protection from the wake up call to mortality. Julian Barnes, the noted atheist, wrote in his book, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, that we all live with this vicious awareness that this is a rented world. The grass withers, the flowers fade: ours is an impermanent life...and home is a steady consolation when the lights go out.

There is this longing for home...

In an interview for the New York Times, Tiffany Watt Smith, author of *The Book of Emotions*, describes her research on the role language plays in our emotional lives...words not only describe how we feel, they shape how we understand our feelings.

One emotion she was interested in was homesickness. Smith recounts how, in the mid- to late-18th century, homesickness was counted as a credible source of physical ailment and a possible cause of death.

According to medical records, homesick patients experienced the symptoms of depression and fatigue, but they also suffered surprising physical ones, such as sores, pustules and fevers. In severe cases, the sufferers refused to eat, grew weak and eventually died. Their doctors labeled their deaths as severe cases of nostalgia - from the word nostos - homecoming and algia - pain. The last mention of death by nostalgia was on a death certificate was in 1918. As writer Jen Michel says, "Nostalgia may have disappeared from our medical dictionaries, but we have not cured our ache for home. To be human is to know the grief of paradise lost."

In Genesis 13, we are told of Lot. Lot is Abraham's cousin. These two lived in the land of Ur, but God called Abraham to leave his home and to travel to a home full of descendants...to a place where he would know God and be known by Him. They made their way to Canaan by way of Egypt with livestock, gold, and silver. They pitched their tents, as wanderers do, and they look out over the land, their longing for a place, for settlement, for a home about to be met, here in the Jordan Valley.

Abraham gives Lot first pick. Lot, where do you want to make your home?

Lot, the first homesteader scans the horizon, and then he sees it...over there...the river...and it reminds him of home. First, the Garden of the Lord, even though he's never seen it, he has heard about it. The garden, the land with water and fruitfulness. And second, because of Egypt, where they have come up from.

And here we see that Lot suffers from nostalgia. From sickness of a lost country. He misses home. And this nostalgia causes him to go East. In the Bible, east is away from God. Lot in his homesickness chooses Sodom.

We do the same thing. Sick with a longing to be known, we settle for false intimacy. Sick with a longing to know, we settle for insider knowledge and conspiracy. Sick with a longing for home, we settle for East of Eden. It's what we do. In the Biblical account, Abram goes to Canaan. This is to be his home and the home of his generations. It is the place where Abram is to live under the rule of God, experiencing His blessing. This is home. This is what we are actually longing for — God's rule and God's blessing. And the Scriptures promise us that God will bring us home.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

God, help me to pitch my tents where you call me. For where you call me is where I will find a home. As I long for that home, sustain me in this one. Amen.

Week 3 | Monday, December 13th

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."

1 Corinthians 14:26, ESV

§

My entire childhood was spent in the same home that my father moved into when he was about fifteen years old. The house was built at the top of a small cul-de-sac, which straddled the fence between Rockville and Potomac, Maryland. If you have never heard of these towns, they sit less than twenty miles from Washington D.C.

I grew up very aware that my two brothers and I were blessed to grow up in that neighborhood. Families were comfortable sending their kids alone to the park behind our house. Public schools in the area were often nationally ranked in the top one hundred. The number of historical places available for day trips were endless. And my favorite thing about the community was the diversity.

My high school has a 55.9% minority enrollment. Growing up, I always enjoyed learning about the different cultures of my friends and their families. My brothers and I thought the Washington D.C. Temple (part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) was Disney World. Chinese New Year was celebrated at my elementary school every February. My Asian-American friends ate eggs on homemade noodles for breakfast (or as comfort food late at night). Some of my classmates invited me over for Passover dinners and made homemade challah bread for Shabbat.

My hometown is packed with diversity, job opportunities, and culture. However, it is also filled with a competitive atmosphere and a politically correct inclination. Students are constantly measuring themselves against their classmates. Religion is put on the backburner because a career and an education are put on the front burners. Over time, science and knowledge replace spiritual health. And everyone over eighteen MUST have a political opinion.

When I was in high school, all religious holidays were taken off public school calendars. As you can imagine, I had a difficult time as an outspoken Christian at my public school. I once believed that a lot of my classmates from elementary school were Christian, since their parents claimed to be of the faith. However, during my freshman year, I was teased for attending church weekly and believing in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. That's when I realized that all my school friends considered Christianity to be a faith of their parent's generation.

This was a lot for my teenage brain to come to terms with. I wrestled with my identity in Christ and my confidence in the Church for some years. During my senior year of high school, I switched youth groups. The new church staff emphasized the importance of a Christian community at university – whether that be a campus ministry or a local church. So, I jumped right into the religious scene when I began studying at the University of Maryland, College Park. During my time there, I was heavily involved in campus ministry leadership. I also worked part

time at a megachurch with multiple campuses across the DMV area (which consisted of DC, Maryland, and Virginia).

The church campus was actually in my hometown. I was comforted by the fact that the congregation was multiethnic and represented the community I grew up in. 1 Corinthians 14:26 states, “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (ESV). Although my time on staff at this church was short, it was a true blessing for me. My experience with my hometown’s diversity flipped 180 degrees; I got to experience what it was like for people of different cultures and backgrounds to come together for the common good of the Gospel – rather than for one’s education, career, or politics.

-Kimmie Brennan

Through this hometown experience, I have a deeper love for the representation of Jesus in other people. I feel a deeper appreciation for diversity within the body of Christ. Here is an excerpt of a prayer about diversity from Summit Avenue Presbyterian Church:

Gracious God, we thank you for making one human family of all the peoples of the earth and for creating all the wonderful diversity of cultures. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship and show us your presence in those who differ most from us. Lord, set us free from the bondage of racism that denies the humanity of every human being and the prejudices within us that deny the dignity of those who are oppressed. Today we ask your forgiveness for the part we have played. Amen.

Week 3 | Tuesday, December 14th

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

2 Peter 1:16, ESV

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It's a city in the Pacific NW; known for good coffee, beer, and food; cultural creativity; rainy grey skies; lush green forests; above average NBA basketball; and NOT named Seattle. It's also one of the most unchurched cities in the United States. Portland is where one goes to *escape* cultural Christianity.

Portland causes one to consider, "What is truth?" It's a context that eats nominal Christianity for lunch. Spend enough time there and it surely will test what you know and why. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Christians should know what they believe and why. Nominal Christianity will breakdown eventually. I don't mean to scare you away from the Pacific NW. It is a wonderfully vibrant city in a beautiful area. I'm simply noting that *it can be a challenging place to be a Christian*.

So, how might Christian faith survive in such a context? For starters, the locus for determining truth should not be *inside* oneself. Christianity is not true because of how it makes me feel. My conversion experience is not the foundation of my faith. Instead, objective *external* history is the proper locus for Christian truth. It is outside of us and our experience.

What exactly do I mean? I mean this: the second person of the Trinity objectively assumed human flesh within the space-time continuum. We have "not followed cleverly devised myths," but have the true eyewitness testimony "of his majesty" (2 Peter 1). That which was from the beginning, which they heard, which they saw with their eyes, which they looked upon and touched with their hands, concerning the word of life (1 John 1). You were not saved *when you* believed... but were saved two thousand years ago outside Jerusalem. In other words, we are not saved by faith... we are saved by the object of our faith. Look outside yourself to the objective incarnate Word.

In light of this, I hope to provide you one simple suggestion this advent season: please *don't turn your mind off*. For some reason American Christians think *feeling* is more spiritual than *thinking*. But, head and heart don't work in opposition! They work *together*. The entirety of our inner being works together. Our minds, desires, and wills are *all* being renewed by the Spirit. "Knowledge...accords with godliness" (Titus 1:1). "Be filled with the *knowledge* of His will in all spiritual wisdom and *understanding*" (Col 1:9). "Grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior" (2 Peter 3:18). Grace and peace is multiplied to us "*in the knowledge* of God" (2 Peter 1:2 and 1:3). "Be transformed by the *renewal of your mind*" (Romans 12:2). See also Ephesians 1:17 and 4:23, Proverbs 15:14, Jeremiah 24:7, Luke 2:19, Psalm 139:23, Proverbs 3:5, Psalm 49:3, 2 Corinthians 4:6.

When we favor *feeling* over-and-against *knowing*, then we tend to neglect growing in knowledge. This risk puts the truth locus *inside* us instead of *outside* us on Christ. It leaves us leaning on ourselves... instead of *the* faith once-for-all delivered to the saints. So engage your mind and intellect in the living word of God... study theology! Not as an end-in-itself, but as a sharing in the truth, goodness, and beauty of our God. Who is worthy of praise from all our heart, all our soul, and *all our mind*.

-Luke Yeager

Lord, remind us to engage our heads and our hearts this Advent season. As we walk through the story of your incarnation and we are tempted to only feel the emotions of Christmas time, energize our brains to understand why and how. Cause us to ask questions and pursue the study of your Word. Thank you for your goodness to us to involve our hearts, and our souls, and our minds. Amen.

Week 3 | Wednesday, December 15th

Weep not for him who is dead, nor grieve for him, but weep bitterly for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land.

Jeremiah 22:10 (ESV)

§

“And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.” (Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge*).

I have only ever known one home. It stood a peaked, two-story farmhouse upon the edge of a great green sea - vigilant and aged, a steady lighthouse and harbor for my childhood, the corn lapping upon the sides. As a boy I knew no other world to want than that wide country. I happily ran the rich earth and chased the season's retreat before anticipating the coming of the next. The sky drew deep breaths, all its angles freed, so that one could see every point of the day. My homeland creaked as it turned, its days full and right, and I alive for the day and nothing more. There was no need of a future, for the present day was enough.

But like all things, my home did not last. The house was sold when I was ten. I occasionally drive out to see it, the cancer of time having left its boards rotting, its pallor sick and mottled. But while it has passed, my need for such a home remains. We all the same possess a hollow in our hearts, an absence of a place of belonging we lost from the start. None are free of the aching need for home, even those who have never experienced such a place. Home has abandoned us. We cannot seem to find it no matter how feverish our search. We trace its hole in our hearts hoping to find something to fit what has no shape. As Christians we are not exempt from this. There are terrible winters in this life, and our final, joyful homecoming to God is the last to thaw. Scripture details a right response to this painful missing left us until Christ calls us to Himself. We need simply miss it – miss home.

It seems many of us who believe have lost the discipline to allow ourselves to yearn and bend under the weight of our want for true home. In Romans 8, we read of a creation groaning under sin. We are members of this creation, or have we forgotten? We cannot remove ourselves from its chorus. To groan is not to sin. 2 Corinthians 5: 1-5 states, “For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling...For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” Groaning is our response. You cannot help it. If you do not, if you fight to and repress its natural welling up in your soul, it will simply find unintended expression in other areas of your life. Why do you think we encircle our small kingdoms with such high walls, clutch our relationships with such tight fists, and fear the world's turning with such dreadful imagination? Our prideful, self-sufficient souls hate to groan for it denotes an incredible dependency on God. We

subconsciously teach ourselves to stop groaning and convince ourselves such acts are flaws, likely wicked, a failed trust in God. But it is not so. I am convinced until Christians return to the ache for a home not yet experienced, our discontentment will continue to play itself out in anything which extends to us a taste of the home we so desperately pretend to not need.

Willa Cather's words echo the need in *My Antonia*, "At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." There is nothing more complete or great than God. And it is hard to be so long from Him 'unclothed.' Groan. This starts by merely voicing this tension to God in prayer. This is seen in Paul's words above and exemplified throughout the Psalms. David voices his yearning to God transparently and then turns to God's character and compassion for relief. Though we do not know the why, the everything, or the all, we know the character and nature of the God who does. This is our joy, our hope. Our groaning, rightly expressed, causes us to seek and want God more, deepening the understanding of our need for Him and our reliance on His truths and promises in Scripture to keep us until we reach Him.

Meditate on these truths. Know Christ's return is sure though not yet. This is the great joy and sadness at the center of our waiting. As a boy, my homeland would reflect this. The summer would swell and ripen to the point of bursting as the long corn stood in columns, arranged for miles astride the great expanse of the land, faces turned upward in rapt attention, expectant as for something a soul couldn't help feeling. And just as this secret grew too great so that the earth strained at the keeping of it, the sun shifted, the air dried, deflated, fall came, and the cycle would begin again. But one day winter will not come, nature's joy will be fulfilled, and Home will return to live with man again as it once did. Until then may we groan for that day.

-Ryan Davis

Heavenly Father, we live in the tension of the now and not yet, especially in this season of Advent. As we live in this home on earth, broken, affected by time, and so unfulfilling, grow in us a longing for our true home. Teach us to groan for what's to come. Amen.

Week 3 | Thursday, December 16th

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Matthew 8:19-21, ESV

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We read this text and may mistakenly think that there is no home for God's people, because after all Jesus didn't have home. And yet, author Jen Michel says, in her excellent book, *Keeping Place*, that our God is a homemaking God.¹

From the primeval wilderness and wasteland God begets beauty and builds the grand house called earth. God's creative work are set as a joyful preparation for God's children. God placing them on the sixth day into this home that he has created for them and for His glory. This place, this home, earth best suited us...Genesis 1 and 2 have they symphonic feel as God builds to the crescendo of his purposeful hospitality.

It is good is the refrain. God's homemaking work is good.

- light and darkness are good
- dry land, the seas, the vegetation are good
- sun, moon and stars are good
- the taxonomy of the animals/birds/fish are good
- and then the creators that bear my image are very good

Oddly on day two...when God separates the waters and creates the sky...He is mute. Why?

The reason according to John Sailhamer in his commentary on Genesis, is that on that day nothing was created or made that was in fact good or beneficial for humanity. The land was still formless. It WAS NOT YET a home. It was not a place where humans could dwell.

Good is a term God uses to describe home. The habitability of the earth is only good if it could be a home to humanity.

¹ Ideas borrowed from *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* by Jen Pollock Michel.

In Genesis 2, our beginnings are set against the backdrop of the heavens and the earth. Humanity is placed in a garden. Andy Crouch says, in Genesis 1, creation is presented in its totality and in Genesis 2, we see its immediate neighborhood. The garden is a bounded place. It is a cultivated garden maybe bounded with walls, carefully landscaped, intensively cultivated with orchards and the like.

We find in verses 8 and 15 of Genesis 2 that God put. God puts. He places. Here we see the intentional hospitality of God.

The first put in verse 8 is the most common usage, like we put our shoes in the closet. Our iPhones on the bar to be charged. In the same way, God put Adam in the garden.

Home is for place.

In verse 15, however, the put is more significant. It signifies God's rest or safety. Other examples are God put Lot outside the city. God put the Israelites in the promised land. It means God did this in love. It is His paternal and maternal instinct at work. He will protect His children. He will shelter them in His love. Jen Michel says, "God put Adam and Eve in the garden much like a mother swaddles her newborn baby and puts the child in the cradle or crib. Here, little one, you are safe."

Home is for love.

Put can also mean dedication to God. Manna was put into the ark of the covenant. The high priest put on his linen garments. Man was put in the garden where we could rest and be safe, and man was put in the garden where he could dwell with God. Here he would be in His presence and have fellowship with Him.

Home is for holiness.

Genesis 2:15 also says that God put Adam and Eve in the garden to work it and keep it. God didn't make a home for idleness, but for priestly work as His representatives. He is a vice-regent of the king. Men and women too are homemakers. God is a host. Earthlings are to worship and obey God by working the garden. This first home was built on God's generosity and love. But it was not permissive. As an expression of His goodness and His protection. Home had an important rule. Do not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. For the day you eat of it, you will surely die.

Home is for good work, for worship, and obedience.

In this home, nothing good was withheld from Adam and Eve. And when the work of homemaking was complete, God blessed it and He made this seventh day holy — a day of rest. Rest was the coda of the symphony. Men and women keeping company with God, with the land, with each other, practicing the rhythms of work and worship; labor and leisure, blessed by God.

Home is for rest.

So why does Jesus say He is homeless, with no place to lay His head? That's for tomorrow.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

God thank you for the ways that you have made a home for us. May we find the home that you make for us to be a home for love, holiness, and rest. Amen.

Week 3 | Friday, December 17th

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...(this) Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

John 1:1-3, ESV

§

The writer J.R.R. Tolkein believed that fairy tale illuminated the nature of absolute reality. At the heart of it, the fairy tale is a stubborn belief. It is a faith that good will triumph that the sad will come untrue. Tolkein called this eucatastrophe. A eucatastrophe is the overturning of catastrophe. The words of the happy ending for Tolkein are the far off gleam or echo of the gospel in the real world. Fairy tales aren't just good news, but true news. Death isn't the final world; evil will be vanquished; justice will reign; we can come home. There is a home for the people of God.

In John 1, the apostle uses the language of Genesis to announce a new beginning for God's people. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God.²

Jesus steps into our homelessness and our longing for a home to be at home with us. He literally makes home with us. And when Jesus announces his mission, He exerts himself into the story of hope for a home by saying today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus is the beginning of homecoming.

The itinerant teacher travels through Judea proclaiming the good news of home. In John 2, we read what Jesus says to the crowds, the scribes and the pharisees, "Destroy this temple in 3 days and I will raise it up again." John adds that He is speaking of His body. Fast forward, and we see that the body of Jesus is raised and it becomes the cornerstone of the Christian church, the household of God.

Jesus resurrected and ascended insists on the permanence of His presence in the language of home: *I will not leave you as orphans, if anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our home with him.*

Jesus ends our estrangement.

The end of the story is homecoming. We are hardwired for place and permanence, for rest and refuge, for presence and protection. The settings of our first home and our last home testify to the nature of the embodied story God is writing. God will resurrect our bodies and He will bring us home and make a home with us. God will never leave us homeless.

² Ideas borrowed from *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* by Jen Pollock Michel.

Homecoming with our God is true. It is eucatastrophe. And it is the most real thing in the world. For searchers who are searching for home in mobile devices and social media, likes and photos shared, for those searching for it in career and family, for those longing at what used to be in your home and fearful of why you can't discover it in your own home. God holds out to us the promise of what His Son has accomplished by his broken body and shed blood. By the Son who left home and all the entitlements that were his to bring us home.

He became homeless so we could be brought home. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and if he goes, you can believe that he will return to claim what is His.

He will bring us home.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote a short story called "The Capital of the World." In it, he tells the story of a father and his teenage son who were estranged from one another. The son's name was Paco. He had wronged his father. As a result, in his shame, he had run away from home.

In the story, the father searched all over Spain for Paco, but still he could not find the boy. Finally, in the city of Madrid, in a last desperate attempt to find his son, the father placed an ad in the daily newspaper. The ad read: "*PACO, MEET ME AT THE HOTEL MONTANA. NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA.*"

The father in Hemingway's story prayed that the boy would see the ad; and then maybe, just maybe, he would come to the Hotel Montana. On Tuesday, at noon, the father arrived at the hotel. When he did, he could not believe his eyes.

An entire squadron of police officers had been called out in an attempt to keep order among eight hundred young boys. It turned out that each one of them was named Paco. And each one of them had come to meet his respective father and find forgiveness and love and hear the good word from their father in front of the Hotel Montana.

Eight hundred boys named Paco had read the ad in the newspaper and had hoped it was for them. Eight hundred Pacos had come to receive the forgiveness and love and words of blessing they so desperately desired. 800 pacos had come home.

God sent Jesus to bring us Pacos home. He ends our estrangement. He made His home with us to bring us all home.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

Jesus, thank you for making your home with me. May this advent prepare me for home, the home you are making with me, the home that is promised for me and the home that I can give to others as we wait for it. Amen.

Week 4 | Monday, December 20th

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4-5

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The Newari people have inhabited the Kathmandu valley in Nepal for as long as history has records. The Kathmandu valley is unique in Nepal, for it is the one distinct region where there was a large enough, sustainable area for a sizable population to develop; it is from this valley that the first kingdoms were established that sought to unify the people that we would now recognize as the Nepali people. The rest of Nepal is so exceedingly mountainous, with small pockets of people, small villages and tribes separated by immense peaks and valleys, that until the mid-18th century there never was a unification of these peoples.

I was born in the heart of present-day Kathmandu, not too far from the historic center of the Newari peoples. Twenty years later, I was visiting Kathmandu and went to a Bible study with a friend. In the course of (translated) conversation with one Nepalese man, it was discovered that I had been born in the same hospital as this man, to which he exclaimed “My Newari brother!” This man, who has ancestors dating back as far as history has records in the Kathmandu valley, jestingly welcomed me into his long lineage on the basis of the strange coincidence that would bring two Kansas-born, farm-raised missionaries to his country to have a child in the same hospital in which he had been born. How strange an adoption!

As I reflect on this exclamation, two considerations come to mind: First, he was my brother, but not on the basis of the coincidence of the geographical proximity of our birth, but on the basis of the predetermined geographical proximity to the birth of God incarnate here on Earth; Christ was born that He might welcome me and my Newari brother into His family as brothers in Christ.

Second, I am struck that the ease of my “adoption” into the Newari people is a beautiful picture of our adoption into the family of God. I did not choose to be born in that hospital, in Kathmandu, on the far side of the world from anything resembling home for my parents; I did not choose any aspect of what gave me the “credentials” of my adoption. And yet, it was proclaimed over me, “My Newari brother!” How similar is this to our adoption into Christ’s family? We do nothing to merit or earn the “credentials” of our adoption; there is nothing that we can do to choose the events that shape and mold our path into His family. And yet, just as I stood bemused by this exclamation in Nepalese and required translation and explanation, Christ has already been proclaimed over us “My brother!” or “My sister!” as we stand bemused and await translation and explanation of what has been declared over us.

Today, I reflect on the kind generosity of my Newari brother, and I anxiously await the day when we will stand together before Christ and exclaim, “My Christian brother!”

-Joshua Spare

Most gracious and loving Father, you have freely offered us sonship and daughtership by the work of your Son; may we cling to that promise, not as a cheap token of our allegiance, but as a dear reminder of your deep care for us, as a sweet assurance of your vested interest in our lives, and as a grounding truth of our meaning and purpose being found in you. Holy Spirit, fill us with the truth of this assurance; give us new life, new breath, new hope, new love as we are shaped and filled with the great depth of this promise. Please give to us love and grace to live as your sons and daughters; lead us to repentance and contrition when we do not live as such. And help us to see one another as fellow brothers and sisters in you, Lord Jesus, that we may grow in unity in our adoption. In your holy and precious name, Amen.

Week 4 | Tuesday, December 21st

So the Word became human and made his home among us.

John 1:14, NLT

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Emmanuel, God is with us—in every sense, in all the stuff of life. No circumstance is too much for God, and nothing is too small for God to dismiss as inconsequential.

Applied pressure creates movement. Sometimes it's an almost imperceptible internal shift. Other times, the pressure creates an external reaction with a force that can be surprising, even shocking. A global pandemic, ethnic and racial injustice, volatile weather, economic instability, nationalism, populism, famine, droughts, wars, and rumors of wars . . .

None of these issues are controllable by individuals, which is a particular challenge for typically competent people. It is not possible to navigate daily life undisturbed by the world beyond our individual choices—and we do not like the loss of choices and control.

Emmanuel, God with us: reveal what we need to see during these turbulent times.

The external societal pressures we are experiencing have exposed the state of our hearts and souls. Our chaotic thoughts, disordered attitudes, and dysfunctional actions are manifestations of what we have been attempting to control.

What we have learned to conceal and manage can no longer be suppressed and kept at bay. When a crack in a dam isn't fixed, the force of the water will become too powerful to be contained. Likewise, when we do not pay attention to and address soul fissures, disorder floods out of us and into our environments, significantly affecting us and every person in our relational radius.

In this season, selfishness, arrogance, anger, frustration, denial, anxiety, rebellion, division, sadness, grief, and lovelessness are familiar—close, even constant companions. We manifest them and we witness them spill out of others.

None of these issues are new. These soul fissures were being experienced before Jesus's birth, when men and women were waiting for the Messiah to come. They, like us, were hanging on to hope for the world to be made new.

Emmanuel, God is with us—in our hoping and in our active waiting for change and relief during this Advent season.

Advent literally means “arrival.” Now, just as back then, we are invited to wait with genuine expectancy for Christ's arrival and participation in the messiness of our lives and world.

May we look for and embrace the uncomfortable helplessness that leads us in utter dependence straight into the trustworthy and faithful presence of Christ.

Rather than being filled with shame and ignoring or covering up what comes out when pressure is applied, we can choose to acknowledge our humanness and the inevitability of making mistakes and sometimes sinning.

Rather than ignoring or excusing our attitudes and actions, we have the opportunity to bring our humanness to the Lord—for forgiveness, healing, and transformation.

We have the opportunity to authentically model for others that we are all being invited by the Lord to bring every aspect of our lives into the presence of Emmanuel, knowing there is redemption.

Emmanuel, God with us: during Advent, restore our hope in the waiting for restoration and transformation.

-Nina Barnes

My prayer is that during difficult seasons we spend time in God's presence, humbly seeking mercy, grace, and transformation—for ourselves and for the world.

Emmanuel, God with us: Refresh, enliven, and strengthen us. Renew our desire to reflect your character more accurately, by expressing your love in this troubled and weary world during this Advent season and beyond.

"Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people."

Revelation 22:20b–21, NLT

Week 4 | Wednesday, December 22nd

It is a peculiar scene: Two women with two extraordinary pregnancies. One is a teenager whose womb is like the world at creation: teeming with life formed by fiat. The other is a woman “advanced in years,” withered by the reproach of barrenness, and now her frown is turned upright with every backflip of the infant growing inside her belly. Pregnancy is one of the most remarkable windows into the discipline of waiting. Juxtaposed with the deafening silence of a waiting Israel longing for her Messiah, a pregnant Elizabeth greets her cousin Mary with this exclamatory benediction: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! . . . And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:42b, 45).

With their extended midsections awaiting the arrival of sons, these women are companions to those of us who wait. Some of us are waiting for pregnancies. Others are waiting for marriages, jobs, good news, etc. Perhaps you are waiting for something so precious and so dear that you can hardly speak its name.

What do we need in the vulnerable labor of waiting? We see it clearly in this text: encouragement in community. We need friends who know intimately what we are waiting for and who speak the same benediction over us: “Blessed are you who believed . . .” Paul asks the Galatian Christians to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). James says that healing is in the praying for one another (James 5:16). The writer of Hebrews also confirms that encouragement in a community helps “spur one another on” (Heb. 10:24–25).

In the season of Advent, we are looking toward the fulfillment of God’s promises. We are hoping and waiting for the redemption of mind, body, and soul. Waiting, by nature, is complex. To continue in hope, we need the community of faith and her benedictions to help us along the way.

How can we foster habits of encouragement in our communal lives?

Encourage scripturally. Many of us may find the practice of encouragement awkward, and we often are not rehearsed in uplifting others. Being generally more fluent in criticism and complaint, many of us lack proficiency in the language of encouragement. What should we do? Paul tells us that “through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). Memorize passages of scripture that have encouraged you in the silence and darkness of waiting and speak those words to others. Just as God’s word brings life in the void of worlds and wombs, so too does his word bring life to the weary.

Encourage specifically. Spend intentional time thinking about those around you and where you see the Lord’s handiwork in their lives. When you see goodness and godliness in others, tell them! It is proper and necessary in our communities to lovingly point out areas of sin and opportunities for change, but it is equally vital to admonish and affirm where we see growth in spiritual maturity and greater alignment with the image of Christ.

Encourage selflessly. Unfortunately, we live in a society that often functions with a scarcity mindset—if there is encouragement for one, there is not enough encouragement for another. But that is not so in the economy of God’s kingdom. Encouragement begets encouragement, and there is plenty to go around. The discipline of blessing others forms us to believe that just as God

loves a cheerful giver and honors the generosity of his people, he loves a cheerful encourager and blesses those who bless others.

When we encourage one another, we are participating in the work of the Spirit, comforting others toward hope amid silence and waiting (Phil. 2:1).

Encourage scripturally. Encourage specifically. Encourage selflessly.

-Ashley Williams

Lord, sprinkle our words with benedictions for those awaiting, with wearied hope, the sure appearance of our promised Messiah. Amen.

Week 4 | Thursday, December 23rd

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war?

Job 38:22-23, ESV

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When people ask me where I'm from, I tell them that I've lived in the Albuquerque area since I was 11, so I claim it as my hometown. And in most ways, it has been my hometown—I've lived here longer than anywhere else, it's where I attended middle and high school, where I learned to drive.

When I moved from a tiny town in Mississippi to the brown hues of Los Lunas (30 minutes south of Albuquerque), I immediately spotted the differences; I learned several new curse words on the elementary school playground, saw my first school fist fight, and made friends with kids who had never been inside a protestant church building. I was no longer in the prim and proper corners of the south. I was in the Southwest.

But I also reflect on the differences made in my spiritual life by coming to New Mexico.

My mom stepped back into the church after moving to New Mexico to try to piece together some semblance of normalcy with a blended family where half the kids were coming from an adulterous marriage that ended in divorce while the other half were coming from a traumatic death of a parent.

New Mexico ended up proving to be a healing place. A place for us all to start afresh. And a place for us all to receive salvation after such tremendous pain. One by one, my siblings and stepsiblings began to proclaim the Gospel.

In our first year of marriage, Josh and I moved to Oxford, UK for a year of study abroad. When we came back to New Mexico, everything had changed: our friends had all graduated college and moved away, our church had literally fallen apart and disbanded, and Josh's family had moved out of state.

We attended a reunion a few years later for the students that been part of Josh's Oxford study program. Everyone was sharing where they had been since Oxford and the great things they had done in the world of theology and philosophy – most being itinerant speakers, apologists, campus ministers, or pastors.

Josh and I had never felt more alone and disappointed thinking about how little we accomplished compared to the world changers surrounding us.

I turned in prayer asking God why He would take us back to New Mexico when it felt so desolate, and the verses in Job, specifically about storehouses of snow, came to mind. I shared with those around me about the Albuquerque valley and its dependency on the snow buildup through the winter to provide moisture as run off in the spring. And we began to make the connection to our own lives.

We viewed Albuquerque as dry and desolate, but the snow was storing up those many months for an abundance of snow melt and moisture.

Through these seasons – seasons of salvation and great joy from healing, and seasons of dry desert life – God is maintaining those storehouses. He reminds me who He is just as He did for Job, that I can't even comprehend, that His ways are above my ways. And I'm thankful for the ways that Albuquerque has always been my home of healing, a place with an abundance of storehouses prepared for me in my time of trouble.

-Emily Spare

Lord Jesus, home can be a comfort. Home can be healing. Home can be a place where you have called us to salvation. Thank you for homes in which this is the case. Make Albuquerque a home of healing for many more, especially within City Pres. Amen.

Week 4 | Friday, December 24th

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 11:14-16, ESV

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The Biblical narrative begins with home. God as our homemaking God.³

And yet this home is quickly a broken one.

Adam and Eve break the one house rule. Did you ever have house rules? Like this house loves...in. this house we are free to make mistakes...or as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. Sometimes those house rules are just a facade, sometimes they are an unbending law. For Adam and Eve breaking this rule results in banishment from their home. They are sent East of Eden. The very good home God has made for His people stands vacant, doors barred and windows shuttered. Home is a place of joy, but the bulk of the Biblical story witnesses its grief and loss.

After Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's history strings together like a long farewell. In Genesis 4, Cain kills Abel in a jealous rage and is cursed to be a wanderer. In Genesis 6-9, a flood of divine wrath destroys people and place. Noah and his family are rescued, commanded to fill the earth and make it a home, but this beginning ends no more hopefully than the first. God tells them to move and fill the earth, but they want to stay and build a tower to the heavens. They attempt to *place* themselves and their self-placement is thwarted, and they are scattered. The construction site becomes a vacant lot, another spectacle of blight and abandonment, like the lot in Parks and Rec, the pit that Andy Dwyer falls in. Just like Leslie Knope's dogged pursuit of a park for the pit, so does our God seek to re-settle us and make a place for us.

Here, the Bible seems to become a book of migration. Faith in the life of the patriarchs is nomadic. A quest for landed-ness and a search for home.

Abraham's story is a story of getting going. Get going from your country, from your kindred, from your father's house. Get going with your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.

What you get as you get going is both promise and peril; reward and risk.

And yet still no settlement.

³ Ideas borrowed from *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* by Jen Pollock Michel.

Abraham doesn't fully inherit the land. And at his death what does he have, but a small piece of property, a cave in the field of Machpelah, purchased for a burial plot, where he says, I am a sojourner and foreigner among you. I am a rambling man, a wanderer.

Jen Michel says Abraham died clinging tenaciously to divine promissory notes. It looks like he is dying empty-handed. He was promised a home, but hadn't received it, and neither would his son Isaac or grandson Jacob.

These all died according to Hebrews 11 *"not having received the things promised...but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."*

These patriarch were pilgrims looking forward to a city that has no foundations, whose designer and builder was God. And to emphasize the forward looking hope of these people. Genesis ends with Joseph's embalmed body placed in a coffin in Egypt. Jacob is dead, Joseph is dead, Canaan is a distant memory; home for God's people is a distant hope.

God's people wander to Egypt and there they are enslaved. They are given a home in the land where God will dwell with them, but they wander to find it. God remains and dwells with them, and when God puts them in the land, they disobey and rebel. Though God gave form to formlessness and order to chaos at the beginning of the world, He reverses these acts of judgment, and like our first parents, Israel is cast from God's presence. They too lose home. They are exiled...banished...homeless...

A remnant returns and a temple is built again, home however doesn't have the glory it once did. The people long for the days of old, Ezra tells us. They are homesick for what the home used to be. Like a couple who have aged with children who have left their home, they pine for the days that are gone. In the home, but vacant of hope, vacant of what is, pining for what was.

And yet God promises that their homelessness is not the end of the story.

Their home would be restored.

There is something about these home shows like Fixer Upper and Flip or Flop; Love it or List it; Property Brothers and maybe the best of the bunch Hometown. To see a home restored to its former glory or to renovate it and make it new again. It speaks to our longing for transformation and home.

For the people of God a broken down house is not the final scene. This longing that we have for home is the message of Hebrews 11. It is the aim of great faith. Hoping in what is not yet scene. Longing for a better home, a permanent one.

Not all can take this thought in. Some resist this longing for home as a fairy tale. Albert Camus was a mid 20th century writer and philosopher. He dismissed the idea of God and the idea of home. Camus wrote, *"a man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity."* For Camus, home is fiction. And human beings must make courageous peace with eternal exile. But you can see

even for him that there is this longing, this homesickness. He is haunted by home, even while feeling that any sort of arrival there is possible.

It is supposed the despair is more intellectually credible than hope. The Garden and heaven just another tale told by men to distract and bring the brevity of happiness in a sad life.

Hope in a reunion of home is the heartbeat of the Christian Scriptures. We see it in Hebrews 11. This hope in a homeland, that drove the people of the Bible to face homelessness in this life for a home in the next.

This ache and hope is what makes for men and women whom the world is not worthy. This is what makes for men and women who in the end die in hope even while suffering greatly in life. They are looking for that better city whose builder is God and whose foundations are forever.

-Rev. Justin Edgar

God, may you make us into a people who doggedly believe in a home. A home that is to come. A home that you will re-make while at that same time re-making us to inhabit it. Give us eyes to see. Amen.