



CLOSE to HOME

Creative Resources for Advent - Epiphany Year C

About the theme

When something hits close to home, it affects us deeply. During the Advent and Christmas season, we journey through scriptures and rituals that are tender, heavy with emotion, and vulnerable. We carry the memories and truths of this season close to our hearts. *Close to Home* acknowledges the “already but not yet” tension of our faith: Emmanuel is with us, and yet, God’s promised day—our everlasting home—is not fully realized. It names our deep longing for God to come close to us.

The Advent and Christmas scriptures are rich with home metaphors and imagery. John the Baptist prophesies about the One who is to come, but reminds us that we are still wandering far from God’s promised day; his message hits close to home, especially for those experiencing inequity and oppression. After receiving the angel’s news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth’s home, seeking refuge and safety. Christ is born in the midst of a journey home, in a crowded dwelling space amidst livestock and shepherds alike. The Magi travel far from home to pay homage to Christ, and, having been warned in a dream, they avoid Herod by traveling home another way. In these scriptures, home is both physical and metaphorical, something we seek and something we are called to build. Ultimately, God is our home and resting place. God draws near and makes a home on earth—sacred ground is all around us.

Close to Home also names the pain many of us will carry into this season. The holidays can poke at our grief. Many will be missing loved ones lost to sickness and tragedy. The traumas of the pandemic will still be with us. Many will have lost homes—due to natural disasters, economic hardship, and unjust policies. Many do not feel safe in their own homes due to poor living conditions or harmful family dynamics. Many feel alone and isolated at home. Churches are discerning transitions with their physical buildings; many of our spiritual homes are changing.

This Advent, may we be comforted by the One who dwells intimately with us. May we expand safety and sanctuary for everyone wandering far from home. May we come home—wherever home is found—to live fully with joy, hope, and courage.

Resources Included in the Bundle

- 1. Daily Devotional Booklet** (A printable daily devotional with: commentary, poetry, visual art, written reflections, original hymns, and journaling prompts).
- 2. Sermon Planning Guide** (Offering biblical commentary, theme connections, and links to further reading for the gospel lectionary scriptures from Advent–Epiphany).
- 3. Words for Worship** (Written liturgy inspired by the sub-themes and scriptures for each week of Advent–Epiphany, including candle lighting liturgy for each week of Advent).
- 4. Banner Designs** (For bringing to life as large, paper lace banners in your worship space, or as art families can create at home to create sacred space in their dwelling place).
- 5. 13 New Visuals w/ Artist Statements** (Illuminating the lectionary scriptures from Advent–Epiphany).
- 6. Close to Home Branding Bundle** (Logo files & graphic templates to help you share this theme in your print & online communications).
- 7. Poetry Prayers** (7 poems inspired by our theme & weekly sub-themes).
- 8. A Longest Night Service** (This special service will create space for grief on the night of the Winter Solstice).
- 9. A Creative Worship Service for the First Sunday After Christmas** (A creative worship liturgy especially designed for at-home worship & reflection)
- 10. Advent Calendar** (An interactive calendar with daily prompts for children & their families).
- 11. Bonus Resource: Close to Home Theme Song** (An original song written & produced by Becky & Nathan Bliss of Barnaby Bright).

Free Supplementary Resources

- 1. Hymn & Music Ideas**—featuring original hymns inspired by our sub-themes, shared on our blog.
- 2. Children's Lessons**—shared on our blog.
- 3. A Content Calendar for Social Media**—an add-on free to bundle patrons.

FOCAL SCRIPTURES

Our theme and resources are inspired by the Revised Common Lectionary (Year C), with particular emphasis on these focal texts each week. Please note that there are times when we have extended or combined lectionary readings for narrative cohesion. We've developed sub-themes for each week that also parallel the traditional Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love.



Homesick First Sunday of Advent

The First Sunday of Advent

Homesick (HOPE)

Luke 21:25-36 | 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

As we begin Advent with the "Little Apocalypse" in Luke 21, we remember how far from home we are. The world is not as it should be. Many have lost their physical homes, many feel alone, and many are isolated. Many of us feel as if we are wandering with no clear way forward. This first week speaks to our deep longing—for our home to be made whole, made right, and made well. With deep longing, we watch for God. Thankfully, God enters a homesick world.



Laying the Foundation Second Sunday of Advent

The Second Sunday of Advent

Laying the Foundation (PEACE)

Luke 1:57-80¹ | Philippians 1:3-11

In the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, we see the foundation of what is to come. We see how interwoven his story is with Jesus' origin story. When Zechariah regains his voice, his imagination is also restored. He offers deep praise for God's tender mercy, and casts a hopeful vision for his own child. He sings blessings into John's being. This lays the foundation for John's life. In turn, John will go on to prepare the way for Jesus who will guide us all in the way of peace. In this week, we focus on making space—in our lives and our imaginations—for God's blessings to break through.



A Home for All Third Sunday of Advent

The Third Sunday of Advent

A Home for All (JOY)

Luke 3:1-18² | Zephaniah 3:14-20

John the Baptist's good news sounds harsh, but he preaches a home for all—where inequities are banished, valleys are lifted up, and all have the resources they need for collective flourishing. Ultimately, John's message is one of joy. We are called to collectively build and repair the structures of our society; we are called to be kin-dom builders. Wherever we build, God is there. What we build should be a place with a large table and room for all.



seeking sanctuary Fourth Sunday of Advent

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

seeking sanctuary (LOVE)

Luke 1:39-55 | Luke 1:46b-55³

After receiving the angel's extraordinary news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home to digest her new calling. She seeks refuge—physical safety and emotional protection. She receives a safe haven, a home for her heart to soon sing praise. Sanctuary and safe space is so crucial for everyone, especially the mother of Christ while she prepares to become a home for God. Sanctuary is anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly.

1 Note: we expanded this reading for clarity.

2 Note: we combined lections from the 2nd and 3rd Sundays in Advent into one longer reading for this week.

3 This week, we are offering commentary on the larger narrative of Mary fleeing to Elizabeth's house, and we are also creating art specifically inspired by the Magnificat.

FOCAL SCRIPTURES (cont.)



Invited
Home
Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve

Invited Home

Luke 2:1-20

There is no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn. They are displaced from their home, journeying to fulfill their civic requirements to be counted in the census. And yet, the time comes to give birth where they are, and so a humble home is found. A place is made—among the feeding trough, in a cramped room abounding with chaos. In many ways, Jesus is born without an invitation, and yet, he devotes his life to inviting people who are cast out. In the same way, we might imagine the story of Christmas as God's invitation to be welcomed home despite all barriers. How will we respond?



Chosen
Home
First Sunday After Christmas

The First Sunday After Christmas

Chosen Home

Luke 2:41-52 | Colossians 3:12-17

Home is not necessarily a place, but where we find authentic belonging. In this story, we find Jesus pursuing his theological education, increasing in his wisdom even as a young man. After the Passover festival, he strays from his birth family to dwell in the Temple, listening to the Rabbis and asking questions. Jesus claims and takes up space, choosing to dwell where God has chosen him to be. Similarly, we all need homes of our choosing—people and places that welcome us just as we are.



Home by
Another Way
Epiphany

Epiphany

Home by Another Way

Matthew 2:1-12 | Ephesians 3:1-12

The story of Epiphany marks an end and the beginning. Leaving their home, the Wise Men embark upon a pilgrimage, seeking the glimpse of the divine in the Christ child. Being warned in a dream, the Magi choose a different direction to journey back home. This leads them away from Herod's deception, manipulation, and harm. The Magi make a subversive choice to disobey Herod. They listen to God speaking to them through their dreams. As our own journeys continue, we remember we must sometimes make bold choices to choose a different way.

About the logo & branding

As we brainstormed imagery to convey this theme, we were drawn to architectural blueprints as a visual symbol and theological metaphor. Blueprints are tangible glimpses of a vision actively and intentionally pursued. They are precise and will inevitably be revised. Blueprints give builders the information they need to bring a dream to life. In many ways, the Advent scriptures are like blueprints—detailing the dreams of a God who makes a home with us.

The icon in our *Close to Home* logo conveys a theological concept of home. The hands express our deep longing for connection, intimacy, and for God to come close. As the hands—representing both God's hands and the hands of humanity—draw closer to one another, they form a structure of home. The home structure is not one dimensional; it expands outward, with a doorway offering an open invitation to us all. The hands break through the house structure, centering human connection and mirroring the inbreaking of God in our lives. The logo is both structural and personal, comforting and nostalgic—reminding us of the ways God's home is close but not yet complete.

ABOUT OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTORS



Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

is contributing biblical commentary that will be featured in our devotional and sermon planning guide.

Vilmarie (she/her) is an educator and a ruling elder. Ordained for 26 years, she has served in the Presbyterian Church (USA) at the Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly levels. Vilmarie holds a B.A. in Education (ESL) and an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Teaching. She has taught English and English as a Second Language to teenage and adult students from all over the world. Vilmarie and her husband, Rev. José Manuel Capella-Pratts, live in Miami, FL. Along with the Rev. Cindy

Kohlmann, she served as Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the first Hispanic Latina and first Puerto Rican person to be elected to this office. Among her loves is the love of art in its many forms. These days she feels closer to God through color, shapes, and movement, exploring watercolor painting as a form of prayer and engaging in one of her preferred spiritual practices, "Praying in Color."



Rev. T. Denise Anderson

is creating visual art that will be featured in our devotional and visual art collection.

Denise (she/her) is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the acting Director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries. A graduate of Howard University School of Divinity, she is the former Co-Moderator of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (USA). A nationally-recognized writer and blogger, Denise's work has appeared in *The Christian Century*, *The Huffington Post*, *These Days*, and on her own blog, *SOULa Scriptura: To Be Young, Gifted, and Reformed*: soulascriptura.com. Denise writes, preaches, and

engages on issues of social justice, diversity, and reconciliation. As a gifted visual artist, she creates art that explores themes of spirituality, history, religion, and race: tdandersonart.com.



Becky & Nathan Bliss of Barnaby Bright

are writing and recording our theme song.

Becky (she/her) and Nathan (he/him) work as musical directors for The Gathering service at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas (vpcthegathering.org).

Introduced by a booking agent in Kansas City in 2005 after college, Becky and Nathan both eventually moved to Brooklyn, got married, and started the indie folk band, Barnaby Bright (barnabybright.com). After the release of their first full-length album in 2009, they began touring

extensively all over the world, playing roughly 150 shows a year. After six years of steady touring, releasing three full-length albums, winning several international songwriting awards and gracing such notable stages as Lincoln Center and NPR's Mountain Stage, they returned to Kansas City and were thrilled to accept the position as musical directors for The Gathering service at Village Church. Their most sincere hope since they began their musical journey together over 10 years ago was that their songs and sounds would inspire, uplift, and connect audiences to something greater than themselves. Being able to do this on a weekly basis in a more focused, intentional way gives them great joy.

IDEAS FOR WORSHIP & PROGRAMMING

* Provide copies of our Advent devotional for older youth and adults. If your church has a Facebook group, utilize that platform to discuss the prompts and content in the devotional. Or use the daily devotional in small groups to discuss the scriptures, poetry, reflections, and art.

* Gather a small team and use our banner designs to create beautiful paper lace banners for your sanctuary. Refer to these blog posts for inspiration:

- sanctifiedart.org/blog/let-there-be-light-paper-lace-banners-for-advent

- sanctifiedart.org/blog/art-for-advent-creative-ways-to-bring-our-banner-designs-to-life

* Invite members of all ages in your community to share memories and stories of home. You could invite different individuals to share stories and memories that come to mind when they hear each week's sub-theme. For example, you might prompt them with questions like: "When have you felt homesick? ... When have you sought sanctuary? ... When have you been invited home?" Compile their stories into videos to share with your larger community—or invite members to share their stories in worship.

* Use our liturgy to host a Longest Night Worship service to create space to lament and grieve the many losses we've experienced in this year and years past.



REFLECTIONS ON THE THEME

"I have such a hard time saying goodbye to my family after a gathering or holiday. The feeling is deep in my gut, it's a turning of my stomach and an aching in my chest. There's this part of me that never wants to leave, but as I journey away, the unease shifts to eagerness as I anticipate returning to the home I've created with my partner. I have many places and people in my life that I call home. Within me there is tugging and pulling, these divergent homesicknesses that leave me never really feeling fully at home. I may feel close to home, but not quite there. It is within this kind of in between that we find ourselves during the Advent season. God has come close, and yet we yearn for God to do so again. This Advent season, may we acknowledge our homesicknesses, while marveling at the closeness of God—the home already within each of us."

— Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman,
Director of Branding, Founding Creative Partner

"In developing this series, it has become abundantly clear that the theme of home intersects with the full range of human experience. Home can be soothing and sacred or unsettling and painful. It can be grounding and particular, or it can feel hard to name or pin down. It can be invitational and warm, or it can poke at wounds of exclusion and displacement. For some, home can be the source of war, stolen lands, or economic loss. We navigate this tension of comfort and unsettledness in the season of Advent. In the midst of cheery holiday celebrations, grief and nostalgia may become unwelcome guests. We give thanks for the gifts and blessings of our lives, while longing for the dreams that are not yet realized. We celebrate the closeness of a God who chooses to dwell with us, while remembering what that closeness will cost: Jesus will face displacement, marginalization, suffering, and, ultimately, death. No matter if this season brings great comfort and joy, or hits a bit too close to home, may we remember that God is also just as close."

—Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Founder,
Creative Director

"What is home? Home is where you claim it. It may be a home in relationship. It may be the foundation in life that was built by the family. It may be the structure in which I dwell. There are many for whom some versions of home are painful. I wish I could let those go. This theme intrigues me because of its opportunity to search with breadth and depth—for home can be found at any turn, around any bend."

—Hannah Garrity, Founding Creative Partner



"The last hour of a road trip is always the hardest. You think to yourself: 'This is the home stretch! We're almost there! We've almost made it!' But then the road continues and we are led to ask the inevitable question, 'Are we there yet?' Advent feels a little like the last hour of a road trip. We are close to home. God is coming. We can feel it in our bones—something is about to change. During Advent, we get a glimpse of a world saturated with peace, hope, love, and joy. During Advent, we get a glimpse of a world with angel choruses. During Advent, we get a glimpse of a world where an unmarried teenage girl could bear God's son, and a group of outcast shepherds might be invited to see it. So this Advent, I hope you'll journey with us as we take steps to move closer to the home God envisions for us—a home saturated with hope, peace, love, and joy. Are we there yet? No. But with God's help, we can get closer everyday."

—Rev. Sarah Are, Founding
Creative Partner

"In college, I loved watching HGTV for the 'after' photos that made me believe a house could be perfect, and playing the Sims to design my dream home. But what I've learned from my few years being a homeowner is that the work is never done. There's always siding to be replaced, fixtures to upgrade, and dream projects for one day. Our home is never finished because home isn't a destination. It's where life happens. It's about the pets buried in the backyard and the pencil marks on the kitchen wall showing how tall the kids have grown. It's about the meals we've shared at the table, whether birthday celebrations or casseroles to comfort our grief. Home is where we live out the whole tapestry of human existence, good and bad, mundane and extraordinary, trivial and overwhelming. This Advent, I'm deeply drawn into the complications and intimacy of a theme centered around home."

— Rev. Anna Strickland, Operations
Support & Content Creator