



CLOSE to  
HOME

# Sermon Planning Guide for Advent- Epiphany | Year C

Featuring Biblical commentary by  
Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

Guide developed by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

## INTRODUCTION

### How to use this guide

We hope this guide is your starting point for shaping your sermons, worship services, and scripture study classes. For each Sunday in Advent through Epiphany, we have included theme connections, biblical commentary, guiding questions, and links to further reading and materials.<sup>1</sup> We hope these offer a few ways of approaching and thinking about the texts in light of our theme and weekly sub-themes. We encourage you to use this guide as a companion to the poetry, visual art, devotional, and materials in the bundle—allowing all of the words, images, and ideas to cross-pollinate. You can find full-length artist statements inspired by each of the focal texts listed in this guide in our Visual Art Collection. Consider mapping out your ideas in our accompanying Sermon Planning Grid.

### About the theme: *Close to Home*

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 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.

<sup>1</sup> Under the “Further Reading and Research” sections, we direct you to the work of authors, scholars, thinkers, and writers who might inform or enhance your sermonic message. We do not own the rights to these works. We encourage you to patronize and support these authors and creators.

## INTRODUCTION *cont.*

### About the theme: *Close to Home cont.*

*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.

### Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team

“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**

“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 every day.” —**Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, 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, Founding Creative Partner**

## INTRODUCTION *cont.*

### Theme reflections from the Sanctified Art creative team *cont.*

“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

### About our focal scriptures

Our theme and resources are inspired by the Revised Common Lectionary (Year C), with particular emphasis on the focal texts listed each week in this guide. 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.

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**Note:** Because we begin Advent with the “Little Apocalypse” and our sub-theme of “Homesick,” which has a more somber tone, you might consider focusing on an overarching theme of “Home” for the Sunday prior to the beginning of Advent. This could serve as a prelude to the Advent season and the Close to Home series. In your sermon and worship, you might explore questions such as: How do we define home? Where do we find home? What is the home God calls us to build? How is our church home changing, growing, or adapting?

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### The First Sunday of Advent HOMESICK (HOPE)

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

### Theme connections

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.

## The First Sunday of Advent

# Homesick (HOPE) *cont.*

### Commentary on Luke 21:25-36 | by Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri

“...*Mi corazón se quedó frente al mar en mi Viejo San Juan...*”

The famous Puerto Rican song, “*En mi Viejo San Juan*”<sup>2</sup> has described the sentiments of many in the Puerto Rican diaspora. The song, written in 1943 by Noel Estrada for his brother stationed in Panamá, recounts memories of life in San Juan and the long-awaited return: “My heart remained at the seafront in Old San Juan.” Listening to this song sometimes makes me a little **homesick**, but, most of the time, it evokes warm, nostalgic feelings and brings forth memories of the cobblestone streets and blue seas of my hometown.

When hurricane María hit Puerto Rico in 2017, the news footage of the massive category 4 storm contrasted with the lovely memories of the island. The words of the song resonated; my heart was, indeed, at the seafront in Old San Juan. The storm passed, and we anxiously awaited news from our families on the island. Homesickness crept in as we were far away from loved ones and wished to be close to them in the moment of need. Days later, *el silencio de la espera*<sup>3</sup> was finally broken by the buzz of a text message: “*Estamos bien*” (“We’re OK”). Those two words were hope in the midst of chaos. Those words were **home**.

Images of distress, confusion, and fear emerge in Luke 21. In many ways, the feelings that these words evoke mirror the past almost two years of pandemic crisis—a world in turmoil suffering from disasters, both natural and human-made—speaking to the realities and injustices of a chaotic world. Thankfully, Jesus enters this world offering words, not of foreboding, but of hope to a homesick people that felt far away from God and longed to be close to kin in the middle of the crisis. “Stand up and raise your heads,” Jesus said, “because your redemption is near . . . So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near” (v. 28-31). Even in *el silencio de la espera*, we are reassured that God’s kin-dom is near. Kin-dom, in Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s definition, is “interconnected community, seeing God’s movement emerge from *la familia*, the family God makes.”<sup>4</sup> God is close. These are words of hope for a homesick world. These words are **home**.

### Guiding Q's

- The word “homesick” originated in 1765 from the German compound, *Heimweh*, meaning “home pain or woe.”<sup>5</sup> What is your first memory of homesickness? When you feel homesick, what do you long for?<sup>6</sup>
- What is your community homesick for? What are the collective “homesicknesses” we hold within ourselves? How does our deep longing intersect with deep hope?
- What are the stories of people who have lost their homes—due to natural disasters or financial strain? What are the stories of people who have been displaced from their homelands or have had to flee them? How can you honor these stories in your worship? How can your community help provide support?
- In her commentary, Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri says of Jesus’ lesson on the fig tree: “These are words of hope for a homesick world. These words are home.” What are other examples of words that are home? Where do you see God entering a homesick world?
- Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians resonates with our deep yearning for connection and intimacy. If you were to write a similar letter to a person or community you haven’t seen in a long time, what would you say? How would you express your longing to be close?

2 Listen to “En mi Viejo San Juan” sung by composer Noel Estrada here: [youtube.com/watch?v=VFF7Oz80Xx4](https://youtube.com/watch?v=VFF7Oz80Xx4).

3 “The silence of the wait.”

4 Ada María Isasi-Díaz quoted in “The Kin-dom of Christ” by Melissa Florer-Bixler. Sojourners. Nov. 20, 2018. [sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ](https://sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ).

5 “Homesickness.” Online Etymology Dictionary. [etymonline.com/word/homesickness](https://etymonline.com/word/homesickness)

6 To encourage more participation in worship, you could invite different members to share memories or stories of homesickness. The feelings of homesickness may be universal, but the stories are unique.

## The First Sunday of Advent

# HOMESICK (HOPE) cont.

### Further reading & research

**Read** *Keeping Place: Reflections on the Meaning of Home* by Jen Pollock Michel. Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Press, 2017.

(Note: In this book, Jen Michel explores home as our most fundamental human longing. In particular, you might read the first chapter entitled, "Nostalgia: The Longing for Home.")

**Read** "Statement on the 215 children found buried at the Kamloops Residential School: A Statement from United for All." *United Way Ontario*. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/11kTWF8fM5jpc9d7oxbyL\\_ykS4kJ3TZoW/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/11kTWF8fM5jpc9d7oxbyL_ykS4kJ3TZoW/view?usp=sharing)

(Note: This statement includes a poem by Abigail Echo-Hawk, created in response to the discovery of the bodies of 215 children in an unmarked mass grave at the Kamloops residential Catholic boarding school in British Columbia. You can also read the poem here: [facebook.com/Abigail-Echo-Hawk-1260036730787825/photos/2896828470441968](https://www.facebook.com/Abigail-Echo-Hawk-1260036730787825/photos/2896828470441968))

**Read** "When Death Comes" by Mary Oliver. *New & Selected Poems: Vol 1*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. Also published by *Library of Congress*. [loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-102/when-death-comes/](https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/poet-laureate-projects/poetry-180/all-poems/item/poetry-180-102/when-death-comes/)

(Note: This poem, particularly the last verse, echoes the lesson from the fig tree in Luke 21. It also resonates with the artist statement for "Awake to Wonder" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, included in the Visual Art Collection.)



**Awake to Wonder**  
by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity  
Inspired by Luke 21:25-36



**Yearning**  
by Hannah Garrity  
Inspired by 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13