

“Hope Is a Song” Rev. Michele Ward November 28, 2021
Luke 21:25-36 Advent I: Close to Home
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The second reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke. Chapter 21, verses 25-36. Listen now for a Word from God.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of God coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then Jesus told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of God.’

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PRAY

*I see the moon and the moon sees me/
The moon sees somebody I'd like to see/
God bless the moon and God bless me/
And God bless the somebody I want to see.*

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Whenever I sing this lullaby, I feel homesick. My paternal grandmother would sing it to my siblings and me as we climbed into the car and headed back home from her house. My grandmother has dementia that has slowly advanced over the past eight years. I stayed with her for a few nights at her apartment last summer. After getting us both ready for bed, I started singing this song to her. I hoped she would remember it. She joined in with me on the second line, and we sang each other a lullaby before we both went to sleep. Deep in her memory, that song lives within her and reminds her of home. Because home is not always a place, necessarily, but can be people. Home can be a song, too. Sometimes we need one another to call us home when we forget the way or forget the words.

Our theme for Advent this year is *Close to Home*. The scripture passages we are about to encounter are passionate, emotional, and raw. Jesus tells the disciples of God’s coming judgment, Luke tells us of the visitation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, and we hear strong words urging us to repent by John the Baptist, and the song of Mary captivates us with its powerful imagery. They are all expressing some longing for God’s world to be made real on earth, for Emmanuel, God-with-us, to come dwell among us and set the world a-right.

The season of Advent and Christmas can bring up a mixture of emotions for us, too. Some of us might be homesick or might be missing loved ones who have died due to illness or tragedy. Some of us might feel lonely or dislocated, far away from family and friends. Some of us might be weary with the pandemic and the ways it has changed how we open our homes and our lives to one another.

This year, my prayer for us all is that Emmanuel will comfort us in times of homesickness and grief, loneliness and exhaustion. May we experience God’s closeness to us this Advent, and God may bring us home, no matter how far we wander.

Jesus points us towards the way home in today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke. Sometimes called the “Little Apocalypse,” you might have heard echoes of the Book of Daniel in this prophecy from

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Jesus. Well, if you did hear those echoes, you were listening closely, because they are definitely there! Jesus is building on the Jewish prophetic tradition in this passage, creating images of what the world will be like when God returns to dwell among their creation.

He tells his listeners that they will see signs in nature--in the sun and in the moon, in the stars and on the earth, and they must pay attention to what they see rather than ignore what they see, no matter how disturbing or distressing those signs may be.

And then, as Jesus tends to do, he tells a story. Rather than tell a story that emphasizes the power and might of God’s return, this is a story about a fig tree. It is a story about hope. He tells them that God’s kingdom will come like the new leaves on a fig tree in the spring. Those moments of early life in the spring are beautiful surprises. The return of layers of birdsong, flowers coming up from the ground, and those brand new, tender leaves on branches long barren. That is the kingdom of God, too.

Jesus gives us two contrasting images of God’s return--distressing and delighting, and surprising either way. Like the shock of the Son of God riding down from heaven on a cloud, so will the new leaves on the fig tree evoke wonder and fear in us. I wonder if this is what the world may feel like to some of us right now. We are coming up on the two year anniversary of the pandemic shutdown in the United States, migrants from across the sea and across our borders enter our country seeking refuge, and natural disasters plague our planet. Turmoil exists everywhere we turn.

And yet, the trees continue to make new leaves, Jesus tells us. God keeps showing up in our world every Advent, in the coldest days and the longest nights, to make all things new. And my grandmother can still sing, “I see the moon and the moon sees me,” no matter how much of her memory or her ability to care for herself she has lost.

Jesus says, “stand up and raise your heads.” Jesus tells his listeners to physically embody hope. He commands them to be alert,

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to keep watch, to be ready, for the change about to come. He says to do this “because your redemption is near.” Not only is our redemption near, Jesus reassures us, but “the kingdom of heaven is near.”

Our deepest longings often intersect with our deepest hopes. Jesus knows this. We want God to swoop in and rescue us, riding in on the clouds to save the world. We want God to reveal hope to us at a pace we can handle, like the slow growth of new leaves of a tree. We long for change, for the pain around us, for the pain within us to stop, for the unanswered questions that gnaw away at us to disappear, for God to show up and explain it all.

And instead, we get signs and wonders. We get spring flowers. We get confusing parables. We get God-with-us, Emmanuel, showing up anytime, asking us to always be ready for the kingdom to break out among us.

The hope of Advent, the hope that Jesus promises us today, is not a shallow one. It is a solid hope based on what we know God has done and will do. Hope is a memory of the future--it is full of dreams, desires, and foolishness. Hope is defiance in the midst of suffering. Hope is the daily choice to persevere, to sacrifice, and to keep growing through tragedy. Hoping well means risking disappointment, risking rebellion, and risking disruption.¹ This is the kind of hope Jesus promises us if we “stand up and raise [y]our heads.”

The shadow side of hope is despair. And such a temptation it is and such a difficulty to resist it. Why hope if nothing ever changes, cynicism asks us. Why try to make anything better if the old way of doing things works just fine, conventional wisdom says. Despair tells us to numb ourselves with addictions to substances, to technology, or even to work because hope asks too much of us. We are afraid of looking foolish because hope asks us to take risks. We are afraid of hope because we are afraid of losing control--we

¹ Paraphrase from notes from “Hope” lecture, “Faith, Hope, Love” course, Dr. Dan Allender, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, Fall 2011.

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pretend that we do not care so we will never feel disappointment. We are completely closed off to God, to others, and to ourselves when we give in to despair. Despair says to us, “No one will get to my heart.”²

Here comes Jesus with his prophecies and his parables to incite, to arouse, to provoke, and to intensify our longings. He calls to what could be. He calls the world and us to repentance. He creates a vision for the future that exposes the reality of the present. He speaks of hope.³

Advent draws us into the hope of God’s kingdom coming here on earth, inviting us to live into the tension of the season--Jesus is here, among us, yet not here among us. The kingdom of heaven is so close we can almost see it, but it is still out of focus. Advent hope says to us this morning--say yes. Say yes. Say yes to beauty. Say yes to glory. Say yes to wonder. Say yes to awe.

Keep your head up and your eyes on the heavens, hoping that God will be there. Plant that tree, hoping it will survive the winter. Sing that lullaby to someone you love, hoping they will remember. Embody these words of Mary Oliver from her poem, “When Death Comes:” *When it's over, I want to say: all my life /I was a bride married to amazement./I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms./When it's over, I don't want to wonder/if I have made of my life something particular, and real./I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,/or full of argument./I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*⁴

² Paraphrase from notes from “Hope” lecture, “Faith, Hope, Love” course, Dr. Dan Allender, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, Fall 2011.

³ Paraphrase from notes from “Hope” lecture, “Faith, Hope, Love” course, Dr. Dan Allender, The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology, Fall 2011.

⁴ “Poem 102: When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver.