

2 December 2018

Hope
Luke 21:25-35

The lectionary Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 21, verses 25-36:

²⁵‘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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

²⁹Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴‘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, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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 Man.’

Many churches around the world, including many United Methodists, follow the “Common Lectionary,” a three-year cycle of scriptures for sermons and readings for worship throughout the liturgical year. In that lectionary, the Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is always this one: either this passage from Luke or the same passage as it appears with slight differences in Mark and Matthew. So, on this week of the year, around the world, pastors across denominations join hearts and souls together to ask that eternal question, “What am I supposed to do with this?”

The background to the passage is this. It’s Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem, and his disciples – like all good tourists from the country – are admiring the impressive temple buildings. Jesus tells them not to get too attached, because before long that temple is going to be destroyed. Immediately the disciples ask him for details – When? When? And how will we know it’s about to happen? What signs should we look for? You see, at that time, there were many preachers whose specialty was predicting the end of the world – I think one was named Rabbi Hal ben Lindsey – and the disciples were looking for Jesus’ own end-time prophecies. Jesus declines to set any dates, but he does foretell trials and tribulations to come. It’s a mess to interpret, though. Some of his predictions seem to be things that will face the disciples immediately after Jesus’ death, and others look a lot like the actual end of the planet, but they’re all mixed together. To make things worse, the different gospel accounts of this speech don’t even agree. Mark says not to look for signs, because there are always signs, and they don’t mean anything. Luke says, “Look for these signs!” But all the versions prophesy a time of fear and trouble, with the promise that when things hit rock bottom, the Son of Man will return. Even with that, though, this is still fairly bleak reading to start the Christian year off with.

You know what's worse? This is the Sunday we light the "Hope" Advent candle.

Now I don't usually preach the lectionary, but this time I chose to, because I think there actually is a connection between trouble and hope. I've been thinking about this for several weeks now, since I saw an article about a worldwide survey of "hope." Now I don't know what prompted this study or what methodology was used or what questions were asked, but someone set out to see which nation's inhabitants were the most hopeful for the future. Maybe you saw the same report. At, or near, the top of the list of most hopeful nations was . . . Syria. The nation that in the past ten years has gone from a prosperous, modern nation to a ruin and a mass grave. What's that about? As I tried to imagine what this could possibly mean, it occurred to me that we use the word "hope" pretty broadly and carelessly, to refer to everything from preferences ("I hope the Packers win today") to personal plans ("I hope to finish my paperwork by five today") to daydreams with no connection to reality ("I hope I win the lottery!"). But if the people of Syria feel hope, it has to be deeper than that – hope has to be something that you hold on to when you don't have anything else. If that's what hope is, I'm the wrong person to preach about it, because I haven't been to that dark place.

So let me introduce you to someone who has. Ten years ago, I was an associate pastor to Pastor Karen Ebert. In 2007, Karen was diagnosed with the rarest form of an already rare type of cancer: appendix cancer. This rare form is aggressive and incurable. She was given maybe a couple of years to live, maybe if she responded to treatments. Only 15% of those with this cancer make it five years. Karen lived almost six, and for almost four of those she continued serving the church – showing a congregation how a person of integrity and faith faces death. I'd like to read an excerpt from one of Karen's sermons, from 2008.

*It probably won't come as a surprise to you to learn
that I've been thinking a lot about the meaning of hope
these last six months.*

*I've gone from hoping my discomfort was all in my head,
to hoping that it was a mild form of cancer,
to hoping I get a few good years in.
What does hope mean when the diagnosis is "incurable"?*

*Hope doesn't mean I'm expecting a miracle cure.
It is not in my understanding of my faith
to expect I'll be singled out this way.
I have always been satisfied with the everyday miracles
of skin that heals
and seeds that grow
and planets that orbit the sun without being flung into space.
To expect that God will reach in to tinker with the world
so that one woman out of the billions
that have ever inhabited this securely spinning planet
will die at 80 rather than 45, seems supremely selfish.
Not to mention risky.
What else in this world would be thrown out of balance
to pay for my restored health?
Hope does not mean I'm holding out for a personal miracle
that will put me back to how I was before.*

*But I've wondered if that means hope must be reduced to simple things
like hoping to make it through a chemo treatment
without throwing up.*

*While I know that small hopes and small victories
are the stuff that makes life worth living,
still, I hate to think this is all there is to hope.*

*It seems like building a life out of sugar cubes –
sweet but quickly dissolved.*

*It seems to reduce hope to a consolation prize
when you haven't won the big one.*

Hope needs to be larger than that.

I find myself thinking about heaven, the life to hope for after this.

*At least there is that to look forward to,
to count on as a gift of God's love.*

*But even having an afterlife to fall back on
when this one hasn't worked out
feels less than fully hopeful for me.*

*I resist having the content of my hope
reduced to the notion of some other life,
at the cost of this one.*

I can't discount this life as a practice round that doesn't count.

I can't look to a heavenly hope that diminishes this world.

I like this world too much.

Yes, I've been thinking a lot about hope lately.

*I keep picking it up and handling it and prying it open,
only to find it hollow.*

What used to pass for hope can seem pretty empty some days.

And yet, I still have hope.

*I've come to realize that true hope is what you find
when hope has been emptied of content.*

*Hope is not something to look at –
a cure, a turn-around, a restoration to the way it was.*

Hope is something you look through.

Hope is not the specific ending we are yearning for.

*Hope is the set of lenses that lets us look past all we can imagine,
look past the end where our vision had been focused
and see what God is doing.*

My hope is not in an outcome.

*My hope is in my belonging to and trusting a God
who always has a Plan B.*

Who knows no dead ends.

*Who may not always answer the question, "Why?"
but always has an answer to the question, "What next?"*

*And the answer is always some form of resurrection.
The answer is always "Behold, I make all things new."*

*I have hope because God is a weaver woman
with a plan for how the design will come out,
but with an openness to the materials it will incorporate.
Whatever we, or the world, offers back to God,
she uses as the weft for the warp she has already strung.
And somehow, she makes it work –
even what is ugly finds a place,
and is transformed into a part of the life unfolding on the loom.*

*I have hope because God is an author, the source of the Word
writing the story of the world.
God outlines the plot, names the theme,
imagines all the motifs and symbols that might draw us to see.
And then God creates the characters,
fascinating, diverse, multi-faceted: us.
But as authors will tell you, characters take on a life of their own.
They interact with each other.
They bump up against plot devices.
They do whatever they please,
and they take the story in directions not planned.
But God keeps on writing,
shaping the story with the new developments in mind,
still working to keep the story within the theme and plot as planned,
adding new elements to keep the story going.
So God always gets the next word, and the last word.
Whatever the characters hand to God,
God finds a way to write the next sentence,
an alternate ending,
a sequel.*

*Hope is not about God returning to us something that we have lost.
Hope is about moving forward,
in the confidence that something new will be there waiting,
a gift from the hand of our ever-creative God.*

*God will weave the next strand on the loom,
God will have a next word in our story.
In this I hope.*

A final word: I have not faced the darkness that the people of Syria have faced, or that Karen faced. But – as v. 35 of our reading reminds us, *it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth*. We will all, at some point, face that moment when hope is all we have left. This was the kind of hope that Christ came to earth to bring, hope in a person rather than a goal. Hope is the psalmist of Psalm 39 counting the days he has left to live and saying, "And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you."