

What is Hope?

Luke 21:25-36

1st Sunday of Advent - November 29, 2015

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[SLIDE 22] John and I have just returned from a very quick trip to British Columbia. We went to visit my Dad who moved into a senior’s care facility in September. This move was not his first, second or even third choice, but it was absolutely necessary for his safety and well-being. We came away from our visit absolutely convinced of that, but also saddened by his changing circumstances.. We knew going in that his post-polio syndrome had ramped up over the last six months. We knew he couldn’t walk anymore, that he was experiencing incontinence, that his hands had become so weak he could no longer feed himself. What we were not prepared for were the cognitive changes — the inability to sustain a conversation, the confusion, the indecisiveness, the lost and bewildered look that sometimes comes over his face when he realizes that he can’t remember something he wants to share. I can only grieve over the diminishing of a once deeply inquiring mind, a sharp intellect, and quick wits that were always accompanied by a twinkle in the eye.

Not surprisingly, my heart was heavy as I sat down to prepare this sermon for the first Sunday of Advent. The theme for the day is hope. The gospel text is about the world coming to an end. My first thought was: how, dear God, do I find good news in that!

Today’s gospel is sometimes called Jesus’ little apocalypse. It is an example of an style of discourse that flourished during the most difficult times in Israel’s history. Here Christ tells his followers that the entire cosmos is in turmoil. There will be strange things happening in the sky with the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be distress, anguish and confusion among the nations. Individuals will faint with fear and foreboding. In this situation, with the world falling apart, its foundations shaking, when many, perhaps most people would instinctively duck and cover, Jesus says “stand up and raise our heads because our redemption is near” (Luke 21:28).

Jesus points to the fig tree, and to all trees, reminding his listeners that seemingly dead and barren branches will sprout new leaves in due time. Even if heaven and earth pass away, one thing will remain forever — the words and message of Jesus. Rooted in the good news, the disciples are to guard their hearts and minds from being weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life. “That day” when the world falls apart will come upon every person who lives on the earth. Does the thought of “that day” feel you with fear and foreboding? Does the thought of “that day” cause you to stand up and raise your head in hope?



We often think of “that day” — the day of the apocalypse as a future event, but what if it’s not something that will happen someday in the long distant future, but something that is happening now? What if, as one commentator suggests, the truth of Jesus’ words is that everyone lives in a situation of impending doom — apocalypse — all the time? The truth of our existence is that we do not know what will happen tomorrow. The reality is that tragedy will strike for someone tomorrow — a layoff, a divorce, a spot on an x-ray, a DUI — and that someone may be one of us. At one time or another, for everyone of us, everything that feels solid and sure will start to come apart.¹

When we our world starts to fall apart, when we are confronted with the diminishing of our health and vitality, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, how are we as Christ’s followers to respond? Jesus tells us not to become overwhelmed with fear and foreboding. Jesus tells us not to do the things that all often come so easily, like self-medicating ourselves into numbness, drowning our sorrows in drunkenness, being paralyzed by worry. Jesus says, don’t go there, stand up and raise your heads, your redemption has drawn near. Stand up, raise your heads, and look for the signs of Christ’s presence here and now, right in your midst.



Nelson Mandela’s quote: May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears is a nice paraphrase of Jesus’ message this morning. When our worlds are falling apart, Jesus calls us to choose hope not fear. But what is hope?

Vicar Luci and I have been reading together a book by Brene Brown called *The Gifts of Imperfection*. In this book Brene Brown talks about each of the themes we will be exploring during this Advent season. Here is what she says about hope. Hope is not a feeling or an emotion, but a way of thinking. Hope is a thought process that combines setting goals, having the tenacity and perseverance to pursue them, and trusting in our capacity to accomplish what we desire. Hope is learned, or not, in family, school, work and play with others. A hopeful mindset recognizes that some worthy endeavors will be difficult and time consuming and not enjoyable at all, while others will be fun, fast, and easy. Both are necessary to develop the tolerance for disappointment, the determination, and the belief in self that are the heart of hope. Hope emerges from, is shaped and formed by struggle. In her second book, *Daring Greatly*, Brene Brown calls hope “Plan B.”²

Looking at my dad’s situation through the lens of Brene Brown’s understanding of hope, I see that my father has always had a hopeful mindset. My father was paralyzed by polio at the age of

¹ John Petty available at http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2012/11/lectionary-blogging-luke-21-25-36.html.

² Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, pp. 65-67, and *Daring Greatly*, pp. 239-240.

19 when he was traveling in the Middle East. Friends got him a British military base where he was flown to a hospital in Sweden, and then eventually home to Finland. It took him about 2 years to recover and learn to walk again. He did such a good job of it, that I didn't realize my dad was handicapped until I was an adult. When my father was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome in his early 60's, he did not let fear and foreboding take over his life. He stood up and raised his head. He chose hope, and made it his goal to maintain the highest possible quality of life for as long as his disease permitted. The pathways he chose included relocating to the warmest place in Canada where it hardly ever snows and the temperatures rarely drop below freezing — so that he wouldn't have to be shut-in for more than a week or two in the middle of the winter. He set aside his pride and made use assistive devices like a cane and a walker to prolong his ability to walk, and when that didn't work anymore he bought a power chair to get out and about, and enjoyed life to the fullest. No one seriously expected him to outlive my mother, yet he has. Our hope for him is comfort and serenity in an environment of gentle care for however many days, months or years are left to him. Working together with my brothers and the staff at the care center to accomplish this makes our hearts a little lighter even in the midst of our sorrow.

In this Advent season will we be paralyzed by fear and foreboding because of the tragedies we experience in our personal lives? Will we allow fear and foreboding to dictate our responses to the bad, ugly and terrible things that are occur daily in our community, in our country, and in the world? In his commentary on today's Gospel, Professor David Lose reminds us that fear is the greatest threat to our well-being. Fear drives us to forget who we are, to betray our most cherished values, to see people in need as the enemy, and to place our own security above meeting the basic needs of those in distress.³

Say no to fear, and yes to Christ's call to stand up and raise our heads, to be a people of hope, alert to the signs of Christ's presence in our midst, watching for the signs of new life on the sometimes barren and seemingly dead branches that appear in our lives. Christ calls us daily to make choices that reflect our hopes and not our fears. Amen.

³ David Lose at <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/>