

November 28, 2021
First Sunday in Advent: Hope
Luke 21:25-36
Close to Home: Waiting and Longing

Prayer of Illumination

God of the stars and God of our hearts, our days will pass but your words will last. The earth might fade but your words will last. Our memories might blur but your words will last. The grass will wither but your words will last. The sky could go dark and your words would last. So as we listen today, help us to hold onto what will last. Help us hold onto you. Gratefully we pray, Amen.

The theme of our Advent services this year is *Close to Home*. As the creators at *A Sanctified Art*¹ share, ...”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. The Advent and Christmas scriptures are rich with home metaphors and imagery. In these scriptures, home is both physical and metaphorical, something we seek and something we are called to build. In many ways, these scriptures are like blueprints—detailing the dreams of a God who makes a home with us.”

For the first Sunday in Advent, a Sunday we light the candle of hope, our scripture is in fact rich in metaphor and imagery, so rich that we might get lost in the details and miss the big picture of a God who has already come to be with us and a God who will come again. Our passage from the Gospel of Luke this morning is about that promise to come again. It is often read during Holy Week, for chronologically it comes after Jesus has entered Jerusalem with shouts of praise and waving palms. Hear these words from Luke’s Gospel that were written to a people in troubling times, words that speak to the mystery and the hope of the end of an age of turmoil, and the birth of a new age of the kingdom of God.

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Luke 21:25-36

“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 Man 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 he 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

¹ <https://sanctifiedart.org/close-to-home-advent-bundle-year-c>

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 Man.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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Last week during the virtual fundraiser for Afghan evacuees and refugees, we heard Basir Sophie, speak of his experiences in coming to the United States as a refugee from Afghanistan— after stays in other places, he entered the United State as an unattached minor. He had to learn to navigate everything from the language to new foods to learning how to drive. And while there many who helped him get his bearings, it was disorienting to say the least. Basir spoke about how difficult this disorientation can be. This morning we find ourselves a bit disoriented in our scripture passages. It’s Advent – right – purple paraments and candles; we sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. And yet...and yet we are disoriented by the apocalyptic vision we hear in our scripture passage from Luke. We know that the season of Advent is about waiting and longing for God in the flesh, but we want to wait with the shepherds and angels; we want wait expectantly and longingly with Elizabeth and speechless with Zechariah; we are even ok with waiting in awe with Mary and Joseph. And instead we are greeted with an apocalyptic vision straight out of Hollywood and a reminder to keep watch, so that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.

Seriously – for most of us living in the US in 2021, do we really need to keep watch so that Christmas doesn’t catch us unexpectedly, like a trap? We’ve been listening to Christmas music for weeks, warned to buy presents months ago, lest our desired gift is stuck on a cargo ship in the Pacific. The Hallmark Channel Countdown to Christmas began October 22 – not quite sure how that fits into our liturgical year – somewhere between Rally Day and Reformation Sunday. So I think it is safe to say, it is unlikely we will be caught off guard that Christmas – the day we celebrate Christ’s birth - is coming. And yet... and yet are we really keeping watch? Are we really waiting and longing for the reign that Christ will usher in?

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. We heard those words in the OT passage read by the Juarez family as we began our journey to Bethlehem this morning. The words of Jeremiah are reassuring, with the Lord telling us that a righteous Branch will spring up to execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

So let’s be honest here, it is a little hard to square the optimism of the words of Jeremiah, words we equate with the birth and reign of Jesus, with the picture that emerges from Jesus’ own words: 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. Not exactly words of reassurance.

Just prior to this passage, Jesus denounces the religious leaders and laments over the fate of Jerusalem, predicting that the Temple – the magnificent Temple built by Solomon, will be destroyed and “not one stone will be left upon another.” So when Jesus warns the disciples in the discourse we heard this morning that 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 Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. You can imagine the disciples hearing these words would have a mix of emotions: terror, fear, amazement, and yes, hope.

While the language Luke uses seems a bit odd to our ears – it is the kind of language that would have been familiar to the disciples. It is very much in keeping with Jewish apocalyptic literature, a genre that flourished in the times preceding and following Jesus' ministry. The Old Testament book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation are two other examples of apocalyptic literature, apocalyptic being a word in Greek that means to uncover or reveal. Apocalyptic literature sought to disclose the secrets of God's plan for the end of history and final judgement. New Testament scholar Douglas Hare notes that this genre functions to "strengthen believers to remain faithful in difficult times by dramatizing the hope that God will indeed come and redeem his people."

Dramatizing the hope that God will indeed come...sounds like what we need to be doing this Advent season while we wait, a season where every day the news of the world seems far from good. Waiting for the end of the pandemic and a new variant emerges. Waiting for economic and political stability, and rising prices and commodity shortages rain on our parade. But there are the glimmers of light that give us hope...justice prevailing; evacuees welcomed, fed, and clothed; a day when we pause to give thanks. Yes, these glimmers of life give us hope.

What does hope look like? Earlier this year New York Times opinion writer Margaret Renkl penned an article entitled, *Everything I Know About Hope I Learned From My Dog*.²

She says, "I grew up with an optimist, and I married an optimist, but even the sunniest human being is barely more than a neophyte where hope is concerned. In any household, the true master of hope is the family dog.

Dogs regard any delicious smell emanating from the kitchen as a meal they can reasonably expect to share. An elderly dog may have been fed only kibble in all the years of his long life, but he will nevertheless haul his arthritic self to his feet and wander into the kitchen, confident that this time the lasagna sitting on the counter will be his.

Our Lab mix, Scout, taught me that a dog who has never caught a squirrel will keep chasing squirrels the same way a dog who is not allowed on the bed will climb under the covers the second a bed is left unattended.

Betty, a feist who had never been taken to school even once, would wait hopefully beside the back door every morning, just in case it was Take Your Dog to School Day at last. A UPS delivery driver once tossed a dog biscuit to Clark, our rangy old hound, as she turned the corner, and every day for years, that dog would wait in the yard for his biscuit, no matter how many delivery trucks rounded the corner without a pause.

Now as a proud cat owner, I can somewhat appreciate this understanding, as our cat Mr. Grendel runs into the kitchen every time he hears the cabinet open and a bag crinkle,

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/05/opinion/hope-dogs.html>

thinking he is going to get a treat. And while Renkl observations about hope have a humorous note to them, they actually embrace a biblical truth about hope. As theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us, “the best insight we have into what God will do is found by looking at what God has done.”³ Guthrie reminds us that there is not one hope that is portrayed in scripture, but several.

There is the hope of freedom after slavery.

There is the hope of homecoming after exile.

There is the hope of reconciliation after estrangement.

There is the hope of community being formed from strangers.

There is the hope of the outcast being welcomed to the table.

There is the hope of new life after death.

That is our hope in Advent – all that the birth of Jesus brought to us and brings to us and will continue to bring to us – freedom and homecoming; reconciliation and community; welcome and new life. Yes, we are waiting for the complete fulfillment of this hope in the Kingdom of God, and yet this hope is already here for us as children of God.

Jesus tells us we must be ready – we must be on guard so that our hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life. And what does that mean for us to be ready and to live this way?

It means we live with our eyes open. We live with our arms outstretched. We live with our hearts seeking connection, and our lips singing God’s praise.

We replace fear of the unknown, fear of the other, and fears about our security with the assurance that we are God’s beloved children and God will care for our needs. We build bridges and partnerships. We celebrate our commonality as siblings in Christ because we know we will all be sharing in that great glory together when we are all called home

We pray for peace and reconciliation. We pray for peace in places where peace seems impossible, because the kingdom of God has no national borders. We pray for reconciliation among family members where the pain runs deep, and pride overshadows the ache to reconnect.

We embrace the quiet of the dark, which stills us. I invite you for the next month to start or end each day with our Advent devotionals, which remind us that God is with us in the night. The devotions explore biblical happenings that occur at night – visions, angel visits, prisoners set free – helping us keeping vigil for the One who is promised to arrive like a thief in the night.

We wait for this promised Christ child and we long for the kingdom of God.

Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner says it this way... “So to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is not just a passive thing, a pious, prayerful, churchly thing. On the contrary, to wait for Christ to come in his fullness is above all else to act in Christ’s stead as fully as we know how. To wait for Christ is as best we can to be Christ to those who need us

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to be Christ to them most and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all.⁴

Let us strive this Advent season to wait by acting in Christ's stead as Buechner says; let us connect with others – with a neighbor – with a stranger. Invite others to join us here at PCO as part of our extended family. As we explore what it means this Advent season to be *Close to Home* through the words and images from *A Sanctified Art*, 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.

⁴ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2018/11/26/weekly-sermon-illustration-waiting>