

Dare to Imagine Hope

Advent 2021-Week One

Luke 21:25-36

Good Morning Church Family and Good Morning to those of who are joining us via livestream. It's good to be together as we mark this first Sunday of Advent, and the first day of the new year on our Christian Calendar.

This morning, we lit the Hope Candle, a tangible reminder to us during Advent that our God is a God of hope, new life and new possibilities. Jesus tells his disciples a parable about a fig tree. He tells them that we know a tree is about to burst forth when we see those buds, those first harbingers of something new. It's like when I take my kiddos tramping through the gloriously snowy, muddy fields around here in late March and we spot pussy willows. "Look!", I'll shout, "Pussy willows! Spring is coming." Or when we come across a Prairie Crocus, before it blooms, gray and tight, huddled so close to the earth. Jesus likens these things to a sign that the kingdom of heaven is near, "so when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

What precisely are "these things" that Jesus refers to? What are the signs that the kingdom of God is at hand? If we zoom out from these few verses that the lectionary provided this morning, we get a very different picture from the sweet little fig leaf buds in the parable. Jesus begins this teaching to his disciples by talking about the

destruction of the temple, which in Jewish tradition is the dwelling place of God, God's home among the people, Jesus tells them in verse 6 of chapter 21, "...the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Jesus goes on to paint a very dark and frankly frightening picture of what the signs of the kingdom being near will be - false prophets-those who claim to know the truth, but are in it for power and prestige. Wars and insurrections, in-fighting in families, natural disasters, famines, persecution and hate for God's followers. Jesus' teaching culminates in his foretelling of the destruction of Jerusalem, the Holy City. He says in verses 25-28 of chapter 21, these are the verse immediately prior to the one's Doyle read for us this morning, "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."

I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing, "Isn't just a perfect scripture for Hope Sunday! Don't these texts just fill you with warm, fuzzy Christmas feelings? Maybe we could paint these verses in fancy script on a nice wall hanging?"

Joking aside, it's scriptures like this that often fill our hearts with dread and fear, not hope. Will we survive these terrible things? Will we be found among the faithful? Is everything we care about be destroyed? I remember once when I was about 10 years

old, sitting in the living room as I watched my Mom washing dishes at the sink in front of the window. Our kitchen window faced west and you could often see some beautiful sunset moments. My mom, sighed contentedly as she looked out the window, and declared, "Looks like Jesus coming down in all his glory!" I'll never forget that moment because my first feeling was fear, like visceral, stomach lurching fear. Did she really see Jesus coming? Was my world as I knew it and which I liked coming to an end? What I felt in my living room as a 10 year old connects more broadly to the North American discourse about our final destiny, eschatology. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, so much of this discourse has been about ratcheting up our fear. To the point that every terrible thing that happens in our world soon becomes a puzzle piece that seems to fit perfectly into this destruction of everything.

Then, how is this Good News? Where does this scripture lead us on Hope Sunday? Why would we start the new year of the Church, of the Christian calendar here? Part of the challenge of reading this section of the Bible is how the broader church discussion of last things has shaped how we read this. As the saying goes, if all you have is a hammer, then everything is a nail.

The images that Jesus is offering are not new in terms of the biblical narrative. The Old Testament Prophets frequently foretold both destruction and rebuilding, both punishment and redemption. It was something that first century ear would have been more attuned to hearing than our own. Jesus warned his disciples to keep watch. In

verses 34-36 of chapter 21, Jesus says, ““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 Man.”

Be alert at all times. Keep watch. Don't fall asleep. Keep watch and pray. In my own life, I've often interpreted that as if I just keep focused on Jesus and keep praying then all those terrible things wouldn't befall me. Just keep your eyes shut tight, clench your fists and wait for Jesus to come to our rescue. But what if that's not what Jesus is asking of us? What if this thing that Jesus is doing, this hope that we are called to, this hope that exists in the midst of destruction, is not about closing ourselves off, but about opening ourselves up? Rather than clenching our eyes shut, do we need our vision widened?

The larger context for this chapter 21 that we've been exploring this morning is that this chapter immediately precedes the events of the Passion - Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his crucifixion, death and resurrection. In chapter 21,, Jesus tells his disciples to stay alert; to keep watch. Don't get distracted. We see this warning at play again in the middle of chapter 22. Jesus is on the Mount of Olives, in desperate prayer to the Father, asking to be spared all that is to come, yet praying that the father's will be done. He prays with such intensity that his sweat falls like drops of blood. When he finishes, where does he find his disciples? Asleep. Eyes shut tight. Why are you sleeping? Stay

alert! Keep watch and pray!"

Why did Jesus want them to stay alert? To keep watch? To not be distracted? Why is this warning to the followers in both chapters 21 and 22? What's the big deal?

Because GOD is about to DO SOMETHING. God is work. Don't miss it! It's happening right now, right here. Even when it will look and feel like everything is falling apart, the world around you is coming to an end, take heart, God is doing something! And you don't want to miss it! The Prophet Jeremiah, in another lectionary text for this Sunday says, "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. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise- The days are surely coming, in those days, in those days. We can hear the echo of this in Luke chapter 21, when Jesus speaks about the destruction of the temple, "As for these things that you see, **the days will come** when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." For the followers in Jesus' time, the day was right on the doorstep, peering around the corner. God was about to usher in his New Kingdom in the person and the promise of Jesus Christ. The disciples were told to stay alert so that they wouldn't miss it and miss out on watching

this happen, on being part of a kingdom that would be built right over death. A kingdom where the temple is no longer required, because God is now among the people. The Hope of Heaven is walking the streets, is breaking bread, feeding the hungry, declaring that Love has come to unite everyone in the person of Jesus. That Jesus is like the first buds on a tree, the first Prairie Crocus - Jesus is the hope and the promise.

People of God, this is what Hope looks like on the first Sunday of advent. Stubbornly clinging to the promise that God is present among us and at work even when evidence suggests otherwise. Hope in Jesus asks us to keep watch and stay alert, to not be distracted, weighed down by the cares and worries of this life, by sin that so easily entangles us. While evidence in the world around us points to destruction, we, as people of hope, are being invited to look for the spaces where God is already at work. To look for the buds of new life on the trees even when the thick blanket of snow and winter still clings. To look for God's faithful and saving action even in a pandemic, even in broken relationships, even in post-Christendom. What indeed is more hope filled than the Advent truth of Emmanuel, God with Us. All of us. The Message paraphrase puts it like this, "The Word (Jesus) became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.

We saw the glory with our own eyes,

the one-of-a-kind glory,

like Father, like Son,

Generous inside and out,

true from start to finish.”

Theologian Walter Bruggemann calls this activity of hope, being alert to God in our midst “cultivating an alternative imagination.” He says, “The word has been uttered and the juices of alternative possibility have begun to flow. It is so succinct and guileless, the way of words the empire has not wanted to be uttered: Here is your God! Your God reigns!”, God is always up to something.

So friends, on this first Sunday of Advent, how can we cultivate this stubborn hope? How can we stay alert, as Jesus asks us to, to the promises and the alternative imagination? An understanding of the world that says God is at work, already building his new kingdom, here among us. How can we live into Hope this advent season?

First, we can “keep watch and pray.” In the life of Jesus, when he wanted to ensure that he was aligned with the will and vision of the Father he would spend time in prayer. This is what he was returning from when he found the disciples asleep, just before his arrest. We can pray that the Holy Spirit will open our eyes and imaginations to look for the buds of new life, to see how the Kingdom of God is near.

Secondly, we can seek to step back from the hustle and bustle of Christmas, to peel away some of the distractions. For our family, last year’s Christmas season was as stripped back as they come. No family gatherings. No Christmas parties. No events. As

much as I mourned the loss of all those things, the space created in the life of our family was a gift. Our Christmas day was spent in pajamas, talking with our families on zoom. We ate Ginger cake and we RESTED, we rested over the holidays in a way that I don't think we have since Junia was born. Our advent season was full of stories and anticipation in a way that busy years just didn't allow. How can we create room, even if it's just a little bit, for rest and hope to find a cozy spot around the table with us?

Friends, God is always up to something. We don't want to miss it. We don't want to miss it for holiday distractions, for doom and gloom headlines, for the misplaced belief that all is hopeless. Keep watch, stay alert, so that the hope of Advent may surprise in the best possible way. Because God has been showing up in out of the way places, in the ruins of temples, in the floodwaters of the world since the beginning of time . May we live into *that* hope this morning and throughout the season of Advent. Amen.