

**Sunday, December 3, 2023**  
**Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36**  
**A New Vision of Hope**  
**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, if you haven't already noticed and I don't know how you couldn't have, our theme is hope. So I begin with this story. There once were two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One was a hope-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who only ever saw the down side in every situation. The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys, that they took them to the Doctor. He suggested a plan. "On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist only a pile of manure."

It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance, they decided to try the Doctor's advice. So when the twins birthday came around, they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the line, racing bike a child has ever owned. But when he saw the bike his first words were, "I'll probably crash and break my leg." To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, "You can't fool me! Where there's this much manure, there's just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!" That's real hope!

Well folks, the end is near! The Son of Man is coming in a cloud! 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. And the Son of Man will come again in power and glory – redemption is coming near. Be on guard, be alert. Are you confused yet? Are you looking at your bulletin thinking, hey, isn't this the first week in Advent? Aren't we supposed to be preparing our hearts for Christmas? Isn't her sermon title about hope?

Well, our New Testament passage from the Gospel of Luke for this first Sunday in Advent, this Sunday of Hope, seem anything but hopeful, am I right?! Jesus is pronouncing the second coming, the end of time. The end of time with a capital E. Where's the Hope? Where's the Peace? Where's the Joy in all that?

In the movie "Talla-dega Nights," actor Will Ferrell plays a NASCAR driver named Ricky Bobby. Before sharing a meal with family and friends, he clasps his hands, bows his head, and begins his prayer, "Dear 8-pound, 6-ounce newborn infant Jesus." When his wife questions his prayer, Ricky Bobby replies, "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best."

The prayer is meant to be funny, with over-the-top descriptions like "tiny Jesus in your golden fleece diapers," but I think there's some real truth here. Face it, we like the Christmas Jesus best. We love the story, we want to hear it again and again, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Wise men, the baby born in a manger. All of it. We like preparing our hearts for that kind of Christmas. The Christmas Story we know and love. Dear 8 pound, 6 ounce baby Jesus.

So why talk about Jesus returning, the second coming, on this first week of Advent? Why? Because the first advent, the coming of Jesus, that cute little newborn Jesus is not complete. The risen Jesus instructs and empowers the church to continue its witness until the second coming, the second Advent. You see, God dreams of a day of real justice and love, a day when

glory outshines shadow, when joy extinguishes sorrow, when peace silences violence, when rebellion cedes to obedience – when faith becomes sight. Then the Son of Man will come again. Yea, so I don't think this second coming is happening any time soon because we are really far off from that dream of this world, but we don't really know, do we? It could be another thousand years or it could be tomorrow! So we must be prepared, be alert, to look for these signs and wonders.

Now we know some religious groups have an exact date and time of this second coming of Christ, right?! Although it has had to be somewhat adjusted over the years. And then there are the books and shows like the "Left Behind" Series, some taken, some left to fight off the demons and try to do enough good to be chosen – pretty frightening stuff which does leave us wondering, especially if you read the Vision in the Book of Revelations! With everything going in the world these days, you might think that end of times, is very soon. But we don't know so Jesus tells us to be on guard, be awake, be alert. And don't be weighed down by – what did Jesus say – be weighed down with dissipation – which means overindulgence - and drunkenness and the worries of this life. But be alert. Be alert for what? For the signs. The signs of wonder and hope and peace and joy and love. How? We just have to stop and listen and pray and watch and see.

The Prophet Jeremiah speaks God's word to a people who have been waiting and watching for a sign for years. Most of the Old Testament passages for this season of Advent emphasize the people waiting in exile. For hundreds of years the people of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, were desperate for a Messiah to come and to return home.

And to the people, Jeremiah extends an invitation to hope. The hope lies in God's faithfulness to the people. A promise to King David that a descendant of David – hmm who would that be – Jesus – will come to restore, and provide justice and righteousness among the people. But keep in mind the word justice here, means to save the people from harm. For us today, justice means a concern for the most vulnerable. But with hate crimes, racism, the basic mistreatment of whole nations of people, Our hearts too can be weighed down to the point at times of fear and fainting. And the word righteousness here in Jeremiah means setting the people free from oppression. For us today, righteousness means a concern for equality, socially and economically. But with the signs we see of destruction in the sun, moon and stars, our whole planet and its environment, it can seem ominous and foreboding to say the least.

We, like the people Jeremiah spoke to, look for the coming of the Christ, Christ of the past, coming in the infant child, Christ in our hearts today, and Christ coming again in the future. And we share in that invitation to hope of a promised future of justice and righteousness. And Luke's use of the parable of the fig tree tells us that the past can help us make sense of the future. When buds begin to form on barren trees, we are confident that winter is ending and summer will arrive. Why? Because we have seen this before. The difference is Jeremiah states that this will happen with the coming of a king.

In the Book we have been reading, "Stay Awhile" by Kara Edison, she offers another look at that word King, the coming of the Kingdom of God. She likes to use "kin-dom" not Kingdom. Kingdom, she writes, carries with it the idea of monarchy, hierarchy, and in theology, masculine power; while Kin implies family, humans living together in relationship. (p. 3) That is what Jesus brought, that kind of kin-dom. We are called to live into the hard work of seeking to make God's kin-dom a reality here on earth because that return of Christ will happen.

So I ask you on this first Sunday of Advent 2023, what do you see? What do you see out there? Wouldn't it be nice if there really was peace on earth? Where nations would stop fighting other nations, where people could return home, where there would be safety, and peace on earth? Wouldn't it be nice if there really was peace in our cities, our communities? Where violence against people, racism, discrimination, hate crimes, would come to an end? Wouldn't it be nice if there was peace in our families? I don't know but maybe after a Thanksgiving weekend with your family, maybe you could use an entire sermon on peace in this area! And wouldn't it be nice if there was peace within us? Where we wouldn't be so hard on ourselves all the time, and so stressed out during this season. Deep down we all long for, hope for, peace within ourselves, our families, our nation, our world. We need to join God's vision, to look for signs of hope and peace.

And what do you see in here? What do we envision, what do we dare to hope for this church, the mission and ministry of this place? Recall that this passage is an answer to the disciple's question of – how will we know when this is to happen? How can we be prepared? Well, how can we? Maybe I too like the little baby Jesus more than the signs and wonders, fear and fainting. And I too often forget to pray or sing O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, God with us. Here in this passage, Jesus is not answering when all these things will happen but is telling us how we should live in the meantime.

You see, Jesus' promises don't eliminate the hardship from the lives of his disciples then and us now, but rather creates courage, the ability to be faithful, to retain vision and compassion and empathy. As one pastor writes, We have good work to do here, the "work of compassion for those who are hurting, encouragement to those who are afraid, solidarity with those who are oppressed, forgiveness for those who have wronged us, and acceptance of all God's people – not because we believe our actions will change the world, but because we know Christ's resurrection has already changed the world." (1)

So, let me ask this - if Christ came back today, would he be pleased? Would he find his house in order, things being tended to, things as he left them? Would we pass the test? Well, maybe the test is not about of what we are doing, how "good" we are, but how we are found waiting, anticipating, trying to change, this world, ourselves. Maybe we are to be waiting and watching in a way that shows we know that this is the master's house. To be using our gifts to their greatest capacity in the name of Christ. With open arms, with open hearts, to watch how God is using this time and us in this place, right now.

One of my favorite sermons was titled, "Something is about to happen," by Tom Long. He states, those in the early church always believed that "something was about to happen." So, every word they uttered, every deed they did, every prayer they prayed was shaped by this coming event. It is like expectant parents who actually enjoy assembling that crib, painting the nursery, practicing the pushing and breathing. Because something is about to happen. Christmas itself has this kind of power. People brave crowds at the mall and edgy clerks; gifts are carefully chosen, packages wrapped, and ceramic nativity scenes dusted and set, piece by piece, on the mantle. Every act has meaning, because something is about to happen. (2)

But we also know the sense of loss and disappointment when nothing really happens. Each year we sing the same songs, tell the same stories, does something really happen? Do we really need to prepare and watch for the coming of Christ? Dr. Long states, "if there is no God-shaped future at hand, if nothing, nothing really, is about to happen, then there is only one more day to

be endured in an endless string of days, a bottomless pit of human need, and a ceaseless line of the poor, who are always with us. All there is left for the church to be is another well-meaning institution, and all there is left for the church to do is to whistle its liturgy in the dark, collect the pledge cards and keep the copy machine humming. Because nothing is about to happen.” (3)

But I say, watch out, be alert, because something is happening. There is hope around. I see hope in the world through the small but relevant changes of hostages being returned and aid being brought to the desperate. I see hope in our communities where people are still gathering to name the injustices we see and speaking out. I see hope here in this church with a new pastor coming and the preparations we are making in leadership and other areas to greet his or her arrival.

According to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, there are the three abiding virtues in life, they are: “Faith, hope and love”. Faith compels us to look up and have confidence in the true living God who sustains us. Love compels us to look around and have compassion to help those in need. And hope motivates us to look ahead with the assurance of knowing that the future is our friend, for Christ comes again and again into our hearts during Advent. And the end, the end with a Capital E may be far off in the future but with the 8 pound 6 ounce Christ Child in our hearts, we can have hope that one day nations, cities, churches, families, will live in eternal peace.

Jesus is coming my friends, ready or not. So this Advent - let us strive to bring a new vision of Hope. Because hope doesn't depend on budgets or policies or weapon systems or treaties. Hope is about people, relationships, love for one another. Because of hope farmers plant seeds, because of hope teachers teach pupils, because of hope when faced with manure we look for ponies, because of hope people fall in love and get married and have families, because of hope we light candles and look for light, because we dare to hope, we dare to envision peace on earth.

In the name of our God who creates us, redeems us, sustains us, loves us, and hopes for beautiful things to shine from us. Amen.

1 Lose, The Rev. David. Advent 1C: Courage! 11/28/2018.

2 Long, The Rev. Thomas. Shepherds and Bathrobes: Sermons for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, p. 11.