

Sermon: "We Begin with Hope"

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

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."

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 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."

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Here we are. It's the first Sunday of Advent. We are preparing for Christmas, the birth of the Christ Child. The stores are playing Christmas music. Some of them actually started right after Halloween. Some houses have their Christmas lights up. We lit our first Advent candle this morning, the Candle of Hope. And we have our stable door in the chancel, reminding us to how we open ourselves as we prepare to receive the Christ Child.

But this morning we also hear Jesus talking about the end of the world – “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.”

It's scary stuff - roaring seas and waves, distress among nations, people fainting from fear, and even the powers of the heavens being shaken. Somehow even his prediction of the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great power and glory sounds frightening. It makes me think of a Steven Spielberg movie with Jesus amidst the backdrop of the planets, the ocean and the nations all in turmoil.

And Jesus tells his listeners to pray, to stand up and raise their heads, because their redemption is drawing near. He tells them not to get caught up in partying and getting drunk or the worries of this life. Instead, they should be alert at all times, praying that they may have the strength “to stand before the Son of Man.” While these words admonish us to not participate in those activities that bring us and others down, they also call us to be alert.

What if that call to be alert, goes beyond an awareness of those things that bring down humanity, divide people and pit nation against nation. What if that call to be alert is a call to notice those things that lift life up. What if we are called to be alert to signs of God's love and hope.

As we enter this season, we prepare to receive Jesus, to open our hearts, minds and lives to that Prince of Peace, our God coming to earth as a vulnerable baby in a manger to show us love.

This morning we lit the Advent Candle of Hope. Hope.

Jeremiah, some 600 years before Jesus, had lit that candle. He had given the people of Jerusalem and Judah hope. He had told them that they would be saved. He prophesized their return from exile in Babylon – where they had been sent and were in the midst of great suffering. He gave them hope that from the lineage of David, that great king of the Jewish people, another great leader would be born. And he would “execute justice and righteousness ...and be called "The LORD is our righteousness." He was giving the people hope.

That hope, that great king from the lineage of David, was born in a manger as a vulnerable infant. That helpless infant, because as you know, all infants are helpless, was born to bring justice and righteousness to all people. He would offer hope for a better world. Jesus gave hope to those who suffered from physical illnesses – the blind, the lame, the one with a withered hand, lepers. He gave hope to those who suffered from mental illness – who were possessed by demons or unclean spirits. He gave hope to those who suffered

from injustice - the poor, widows, children, and the marginalized. And he gave hope to sinners – a son who had squandered his inheritance, a woman who was caught in adultery, and the criminal who was crucified at his side. He gave hope to the “other,” the Samaritan woman at the well, the Samaritan leper who was healed, and the Roman Centurian and the Syrophonecian woman whose children he healed.

This Advent we enter into a time of anticipation and waiting. We wait for the birth of a child who was already born. We wait for that world of justice and righteousness that Jesus showed us but does not yet exist. The already, not yet world. And we hope.

William Sloan Coffin, minister and pastor of Riverside Church in NYC shared his experience of going to the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in a Sunday Sermon. He described entering the church to the beautiful music of the organ and the singing of the choir. He shared that he that organ had reminded him of his church’s organ but his choir was actually better than the one at Notre Dame. He described amazing stained glass windows. But in the midst of all that grandeur, Coffin was most moved by a quote he saw on a poster on a bulletin board. It was by Teilhard de Chardin. It read, “The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope.”

Coffin said that those words haunted him. He asked himself “what can we bring to the world if not hope?” He explained that he goes to church out of longing – a longing to see himself, his congregation, this country, and the earth fulfilled. He said “My most insistent feeling is ‘There must be something more.’ ” He says he knows that there is more; that there is truth and that there is more light and that there is more love, but he needs to “let go and let God.” And he said that he does not want his church to be a place for those seeking things religious, but rather one that will “Irrigate the community with hope.”¹

Irrigating the community with hope. Coffin did not speak of sprinkling a dash of hope here or a dab there. He said irrigate. Irrigation is intentional. It is what makes the crop grow. It feeds plants at their roots. It’s a system is created and maintained so that the plants continually receive life-giving water, which enables them to grow and flourish.

¹ Coffin, William Sloane, “The Greatest Hope” The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin. The Riverside Years, Volume 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. pp 480-481.

Jesus said, told his followers not to let their hearts become weighed down by evil and the worries of this life and “Be alert at all times.” He calls us to recognize the struggles of our times but to also be open to signs of love and hope.

I saw that recently, at the press conference that the mayor of Bridgeport held to make people aware of the \$400,000 of American Rescue Plan funds that was awarded to faith based agencies in Bridgeport. It was hopeful for me to see the number of clergy and representatives of faith based programs that were serving the people of this city. And it was wonderful to see that the City of Bridgeport had recognized their work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, supporting those who had been isolated or struggling due to COVID – the work that faith based communities had been doing all along but continued and adapted during the pandemic. That government recognized this and wanted to continue to support this work of caring for our neighbors, is a sign of hope.

I see signs of hope when people of different faiths come together to share the stories of their faith and learn about each other. Such gatherings can dispel myths that promote negative stereotypes and divide us – prevent us from loving one another as God desires. It brings hope that we might better understand each other and recognize that we are all God’s children. And that this church will be just one church of many churches, mosques and institutions that provide such programs when we offer a program on Mary in the Bible and the Quran this Advent. And it gives me hope.

And there are more reasons to have hope. A woman who wanted to wrap children in foster care in the warmth of their own blanket started a Blanket Fairy Mission. Others from her church joined in making blankets. And Olivet was recently approached as a site to distribute those blankets to children in Bridgeport. And we did. And next week, we will join with this woman’s ministry and others to tie fleece blankets, enabling the Blanket Fairy Mission to provide social workers with 150 blankets for children. This woman’s ministry of love through blankets is growing, is reaching more and more children but also is connecting strangers who want to help children. This labor of love has been irrigated with hope.

And as you know, for generations, Olivet’s gym has provided a safe place for children and adults to gather, to play basketball. But one coach not only offers sports and conditioning, but has added meditation and yoga for the youth and for their families. He believes in supporting the whole person. These programs offer hope.

And this church, supports programs that reach out to the needy or the hungry. Through Calvary St. George’s meal program, those who are hungry in Bridgeport receive food. We also support the Bridgeport Rescue Mission and Council of Churches as they feed people locally and the Crop Walk and Church World Service,

feeding those who are hungry in Bridgeport and beyond. Through our involvement in and our financial giving, we bring hope to others.

In our world, we often feel overwhelmed and want to give up. Things sometimes seem hopeless. But we can work together and when we work together, we can make progress. We can irrigate a community with hope. Today, we light the Advent Candle of Hope. It is the hope that comes with the birth of the Christ child, that hope that comes with the birth of Love in the form of a vulnerable infant whose life continues to spread love today. And when we light that candle of hope, we do not leave that hope in this sanctuary or in this church. We bring that light and that hope out into the world with us, to light the candle of hope in the hearts and minds and lives of others. Amen.