

HOPE AT THE END OF WORLD

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

TEXT: Luke 21:28 “Now when you see these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

PURPOSE: To offer hope in Christ’s coming to set creation right as an orientation conforming us to God’s claims on our lives in the present.

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History was made in the Keller house this past week. For as long as I can remember, going back to living with my parents, my house has had its own Advent candle wreath, which is the centerpiece of a weekly Advent candlelighting ceremony. The predictable situation is that, come the first Sunday in Advent, Lindy and I realize that we have yet to get Advent candles for our home wreath. So I go out hunting for candles, only to discover that the stores which carry them are mostly sold out. Not this year. This year, I picked up not one, but two sets of candles, just in case next year is more typical, or in case someone here wants me to sell you a set for a small finder’s fee. So tonight at our house, we will light the first candle, and sing a song, and talk a little about hope. It really is a great tradition, and if you want to start it in your house, I’ll let you know after worship which store had candles last Tuesday.

Every church I’ve served has marked Advent with a candlelighting ceremony. The names of the candles – hope, peace, joy, and love – are about as set in stone as any church tradition. I do recall, on a Christmas Eve service in my first church, asking the children if they could remember the names of the candles. Little Timmy Hartzell, who was just the kind of kid you love to have in church school, blurted out, “Yeah! Jed, Ted, Ed, and Ned!” That was only one of the first times I learned the risks involved in offering interactive children’s times in worship. Every once in a while, a preacher or a worship committee wants something novel, and assigns different names to the candles. But as we enter into this spiritual and liturgical season which invites us, in contrast to the overconsumption encouraged by our culture, to ready ourselves for the coming of Jesus, the four core dispositions of hope, peace, joy, and love remain more worthy of our investment than any other candidates. Tradition! How sweet it is!

But how about the hoping to which Advent calls us? Advent hoping throws us a curve ball that we might prefer not to even try to hit. The more we know about Advent hoping, the more inclined even a faithful person might be to take a strike and wait for a more congenial pitch. The reason for this is that Advent hoping is *apocalyptic*. There, you didn’t think you were coming to worship the Sunday after Thanksgiving to be hit up with a peculiar theological word, did you? What this means is that we hope for nothing less than for God’s plan for creation to be fully revealed

and firmly asserted. Advent hope isn't about my hope for the Christmas gift I really want. It isn't about hoping that the economy will improve. It isn't about hoping that someone's health will improve, or that someone's cancer will be treated successfully. It isn't even about hoping that Concord will have a place for homeless families this winter. Advent hoping is oriented toward the decisive breaking in of Jesus Christ into our current world order. Because this current order is opposed to the rule of God, that inbreaking requires the disruption of all current arrangements in order to make way for Christ to establish his rule over all creation.

In the passage we heard today from Luke, which is known to Bible students as the "little apocalypse," Jesus described God's future revealed through signs in the skies and on the seas, the shaking of creation's foundations, all of which confuses and terrifies nations and people. Not at all what we mean when we sing, "it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas." What Jesus envisions certainly is a time of cosmic foreboding, but for those whose lives are invested not in the current world order, but in the coming one, Jesus says, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is near." This is hope at the end of the world. This is hope, as our advent candlelighting song asserts, that, "The universe is bending, and it's leading toward justice."

So apocalyptic hope works like this: Right when the world thinks everything is going to hell, the followers of Jesus see heaven coming to earth. Right when the world feels its foundations shaking, the followers of Jesus know who is doing the shaking, and why. And right when the glory of earth's civilizations is exposed as abusive of people and of creation itself, everyone will see the glorious arrival of the Son of Man coming to establish God rule over all creation.

Dial it back for a moment. I doubt that anyone came here this morning looking for a generous helping of cosmic upheaval. We're recovering from generous helpings of turkey and stuffing and pies. Or, we're recovering from braving the stores or handling a houseful of relatives. This afternoon, we might take on a few early Christmas chores. Maybe we'll shop for a tree; maybe we'll write our annual Christmas letter. The typical version of Advent hoping has no signs in the skies, no roaring of the seas. Can we get some nice gifts for the people on our list without busting the budget? Can we avoid putting on too many pounds during the next month? Can we maintain pleasant relationships with our hyper-excited children and our relatives with their own ideas of who should be doing what when this season? Can we find our way, some time later this month, to sitting in the soft glow of tree

lights, relaxing without worry or exhaustion or a to-do list still running through our heads, just being content for a whole uninterrupted hour? Simple hopes, rather humdrum, but it's hopes such as these that engage our energy. After all, we don't count ourselves among that doom-and-gloom, 'The world is ending soon' crowd. What's the use in our here-and-now of hope at the end of the world?

Here's the use of it. It has to do with what we give ultimate significance. It has to do with the very big difference between hoping *for* and hoping *in*. If we are hoping *for* something, whether it's a nice Christmas or recovery from illness or our children coming home safe from wartime duty or effective healthcare reform, we are invested in a specific outcome, and we run the risk of attaching too much importance to the outcome we have in mind. If things don't turn out the way we'd hoped, that invites cynicism or despair. As far as our relationship with God, it gets us to wondering whether God cares about us.

But hoping *in* God, even as we are dealing with an illness, or a worry, or a great challenge, keeps us open, and confident, and free. It keeps us from investing too much spiritual stock in specific outcomes. It opens our eyes to what God is doing in and through whatever might be going on in our lives. This may not sound all that earth-shaking, all that apocalyptic, but it actually is. Hoping in God orients us to the bending of the universe, to the deep movement of creation toward being reconciled with our creator. Apocalyptic thinking in Bible times worked like this: it was most popular at times when God's people were facing suffering or persecution. Seen from the perspective of historical events, times such as those appeared to offer evidence that faithfulness to God's way was of no benefit. Why confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior if that was just going to get you fed to the lions? But the apocalyptic perspective allowed believers to look more deeply into historical events to see what was really going on, how God's purposes were being fulfilled, especially in times of oppression or persecution. Fred Craddock puts it this way: "Amid painful and prolonged suffering, where there can be seen on the horizon of predictable history no relief from disaster, faith turns its face toward heaven not only for a revelation of God's will but also for a vision of the end of the present misery and the beginning of the age to come."¹

1

So how about the predictable history of our time? What realistic hope is there for relief from this depressed economy, what with bailed out banks still engaging in risky financial games, and recovery having to do with us buying more stuff, which uses more of the earth's already depleted resources? What realistic hope is there for a just, peaceful, and lasting resolution to the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan, when we cannot ignore the deeply rooted hostilities and injustices which no battlefield victory can overcome? What realistic hope is there for a truly effective reform of our health care system, when the current debate is malignant with politics and vested interests? Think this way, and there really are no options other than despair or cynicism. But what if, facing challenges of economy, and global terror, and health care inequalities, we take up Advent hoping, hoping *in* God, who is inaugurating a new age of real peace and lasting justice through the coming of Jesus Christ into the world?

When our delegation visited Zimbabwe two years ago, the political and economic situation there was dire. There were many conversations with our church friends about what was messed up, and what it would take to set things on a path to stability. In one conversation, after our hosts acknowledged enormous impediments to real change, one of them said, "But we are hopeful." We asked, "Is that because you think Mugabe will lose the upcoming election?" "No," they responded, "we are sure he will rig the election to assure his victory." "Are you hoping that some kind of international intervention will force the government to adopt more sensible economic policies?" "No," they responded, "Mugabe doesn't care what the international community does." And so on. We asked about one possibility after another for improvement in their country, and our hosts responded with reasons why each possibility was unrealistic. "So what are you hoping for?" We finally asked. One of them smiled, a smile of faith well nurtured and patiently sustained, and said, "We hope in God."

Do not think that such hope is passive in the face of the challenges of the day. Our Christian friends in Zimbabwe let that hope fuel their enthusiasm for the gospel, for caring for their neighbors in need, for taking up ambitious plans for church development and social service. They do these things because they know in their

souls which way the universe is bending.

The season of Advent invites us to pull back history's curtain to discover what really is happening, which is that God is fulfilling God's purposes for creation. For certain, that fulfillment requires the collapse of all that is not allied with God's purposes. No doubt that is a frightening prospect, even for those who hail the coming of the Promised One. But it is ours to be hopeful, even at the end of the world, because we hope in God, who has promised a realm where all live in peace and plenty, who is bending the universe toward reconciliation with its creator, and who has given us Jesus as the assurance that the new age has already begun to be established on earth.