



“A Royal Welcome: Welcoming Hope”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

December 2, 2018

Luke 21:25-36

Well, we are officially in the Advent season and for the next four weeks until Christmas our theme will be “A Royal Welcome.” Today, as we light the first candle of the Advent wreath, we welcome a glimmer of hope into this world. And it is easy to be hopeful as we decorate the room with garland, lights, trees, and poinsettias. It’s easy to welcome hope when we deck the halls. Deck the halls... that was the first carol my youngest daughter, Beatrice learned. Amanda and I would sing “Deck the halls with boughs of holly...” and she would stick her tongue out and sing, “lalalalalala!” Many of my favorite memories as a child, and now with my own children, center around Christmas. Christmas and children seem to be a natural pairing. We always think about kids waking up early on Christmas morning, running down the stairs where a flickering Christmas tree is pregnant with presents, ready for the giggles and smiles of eager faces. And you know, three hundred and sixty-four days of the year, children across the world don’t want to get out of bed. Yet, on Christmas morning when every parent is on vacation and wants to sleep in, children are awake before the sun is up! And for us parents, we’ve barely finished wrapping the gifts and laid our heads on the pillow. It doesn’t take much to wake kids up on Christmas morning. They have kept watch, or as the scripture of today says, they have raised their heads. The children know that Christmas is coming and that it is a time to welcome hope.

But today’s lectionary text (the scripture verses put together decades ago to take us through the entire Bible in three years) gives us an apocalyptic warning rather than Christmas cheer. I mean, we just hung the green and decked the halls! Where is jolly old Saint Nicholas when we need him? Where is the laughter and the joy? It’s Christmas! Christmas is when we recognize the silent night and the holy night, where all is calm and all is bright. Instead we hear the loud cries of destruction and chaos... “nations will be in anguish...the roaring and tossing of the sea...People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world...the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Well, that’s not in any of the Christmas movies I tend to watch this time of year. That’s some vivid imagery and it sounds terrible!

You see, today’s lectionary passage is a piece of a longer apocalyptic discourse in which Jesus warns the people of coming persecutions and predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus knew that things were about to get really, really bad and he wanted to prepare the people. He basically told them, “Heads up! Keep awake! Stay aware that in the midst of the judgment, the terrors, and the cosmic signs that hope is on the horizon.” And in this apocalyptic prediction of Jesus we see a people straining and yearning for that hope.

And we need a word of hope today because this doomsday prophecy is a strange way to begin the season of Advent. After all, Advent is a time to prepare our hearts in joyful anticipation of Christ’s birth. How can this apocalyptic end-time prophecy of the Son of Man coming “with power and great glory” reveal to us an almighty God coming as a helpless infant? Instead of

armies of angels as we see in the birth narrative, we hear of Jerusalem surrounded by human armies bringing destruction and despair. And during this season, we should be celebrating “God with us” – the Emmanuel who comes into the world, not the fear and foreboding that will come and cause many to faint under its strain. It seems like as we begin the season of Advent we are struck by the abruptness of the harsh realities of this world. We need the coming and welcoming of hope.

The architects of the lectionary gave us an eschatological, an apocalyptic or end times text, as a way to frame Advent as the end of an old order and the birth of a new era. Last week, during Reign of Christ Sunday, I mentioned that Jesus didn’t want to copy Herod’s way of ruling from a gold throne, but instead gave his life, nailed to a throne that was his cross. The hope we have today is that the one who will bring change and justice to the world is the one who will be born, not into a place of power, not in a palace with a golden throne, but lowly, in a wooden manger that would be his bed. So, this apocalyptic foreshadowing today beckons us to enter into the coming of Advent with a wakeful and watchful spirit. We must keep our heads up, our eyes open, for where hope breaks through. We must be ready to welcome hope, the Christ-child, who will change the world.

But it’s difficult to welcome hope when we do not live in a Christmas world. We turn on the news or flip through the newspaper or scroll through our twitter feed and we get all of the tragic headlines of the day. War and famine in Yemen leaving millions hungry, scared, and dying. Tear gas being used on women and children at the border. A devastating Ebola outbreak in the Congo. Jews being targeted out of prejudice and fear. School shootings and mass shootings still rising in this country. My heart breaks when precious Beatrice sings yet another carol, “peace on earth and mercy mild...” when our world is in so much trouble. Children’s visions of sugar plums are washed away by the tears of being separated from their families or going to bed hungry. Fires sprouting up everywhere and earthquakes flattening cities. Maybe Jesus had it right. Maybe the fear and foreboding of which Jesus spoke is actually what we are experiencing. We desperately need Jesus! We desperately need hope!

And the glimmer of hope we have this Advent season is that Jesus promised to never abandon his disciples amid the tumult and trauma of the world, but to be with them, strengthen and encourage them, and equip them not merely to endure the challenges of the day but to grow the kingdom of God and spread divine love. Jesus did not eliminate fear or hardship from the lives of his followers, but rather created courage, the foundation to be faithful, the ability to live lives of compassion and empathy and justice, even while afraid. Which shows us that even amid the tumult and trauma of our age, we are not alone, we are not helpless, we are not hopeless.

We are entering a season when we remember that Jesus broke into this world and brought us hope. And with that hope we are empowered to do the good work of being Jesus’ disciples in the world – “the work of compassion for those who are hurting, encouragement to those who are afraid, solidarity with those who are oppressed, resistance to evil, forgiveness for those who have wronged us, and acceptance of all of God’s people” – not because our little actions of good and kindness will actually change much, but because we know Christ’s resurrection has already changed everything. We act, with hope, because Jesus’ presence has already changed the world. We simply have to welcome it.

And I think that is why we have this Gospel text today, to remind us that misery is not the end of the story. That destruction is not the end. That loneliness is not the end. That hate is not the end. That the crumbling of the Temple, as we heard from Jesus several weeks ago, those large stones which none would survive, is not the end of God's presence with God's people. The heaviness of life that breaks our backs and hangs our heads is not the last word! The last word from Jesus is that we're entering a season of welcome, a season where we welcome hope, peace, joy, and love. Jesus' last word is, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Yes! The disappointment, the despair, the disease, even death does not have the final word. God has the final word! And that word is a word of hope!

So, I'm a fan of comedy and like to listen to comedic podcasts and watch sitcoms at night. It helps to bring my mind into happier places and de-stress a bit. Recently, I have been digging deep into the comedic archives on YouTube. And you know I've gotten deep into the internet when I found a wonderfully popular series of comedic sketches with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks from the 1960s called the "2000-Year-Old Man." The premise was that Reiner interviewed Brooks who was 2000 years old. Reiner wanted to know what life was like thousands of years ago. At one point, Reiner asked the old man, "Did you always believe in God?" Brooks replied in his rapid and deadpan way, "No. We had a guy in our village named Phil, and for a time we worshiped him." Reiner wondered, "You worshiped a guy named Phil? Why?" "Because he was big, and mean, and he could break you in two with his bare hands!" The interviewer then asked, "Did you have prayers?" Brooks answered, "Yes, would you like to hear one? O Phil, please don't be mean, and hurt us, or break us in two with your bare hands." Reiner then said, "So when did you start worshiping God?" And then Brooks gave this wonderful answer, "Well, one day a big thunderstorm came up, and a lightning bolt hit Phil. We gathered around and saw that he was dead. Then we said to one another, 'There's somthin' bigger than Phil!'"

I know that we are overwhelmed by what is happening in the world right now. I know we are weighed down by the division and hurt in our country. I know it feels like the end of the world and that everything will soon be crashing down. But there is somethin' bigger than Phil! The people in the first century who walked the earth when Jesus did also lived in anxious times. They were being persecuted, their house of God was destroyed, their Messiah had died. What were they to do? How could they go on? They did what we are to do in Advent. They waited in hope. They welcomed hope that Jesus had the last word. And even though it felt like the end of the world, Jesus said that they needed to stand and lift up their heads!

I know it is difficult to lift our heads and our eyes to God. I know that the weight of the world causes us to slump and slouch. I too am searching for that glimmer of hope and have been especially drawn to Anne Lamott's new book, *Almost Everything: Notes on Hope*. In it she writes, "Hate weighed me down and muddled my thinking. It isolated me and caused my shoulders to hunch, the opposite of sticking together and lifting our hands and eyes to the sky. The hunch changes our posture, because our shoulders slump, and it changes our vision as we scowl and paw the ground. So as a radical act we give up the hate and the hunch the best we can. We square our shoulders and lift our gaze." She's right, because many things work against us to keep us from lifting our gazes and squaring our shoulders. But when we do, we are welcoming

hope and we see the “Son of Man coming.” Indeed, it is only when we stand up and raise our heads that we recognize the presence of Christ already among us, in each one of us.

That is the message of Advent. That in the midst of tragedy, in the midst of war and rumors of war, in the midst of oppression and poverty, in the midst of our own personal losses, we can raise our heads and look for the Son of Man because he will always be near to us. That is the hope of Advent. That is the hope of Emmanuel, God with us, in every circumstance of our lives. One commentator said it this way, “In the beginning God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. Where was God? In the darkness. Moses went up into the darkness that covered Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Where was God? In the midst of the darkness. On Easter morning, while it was still dark, Jesus rose from the dead. Where was God? In the darkness. Advent is a season in which we remember that we are a people of hope. We are the Christmas people. We sing to Emmanuel because God is with us. When we sense that we are lost in the darkness, Advent reminds us that we are not alone. The God of hope is with us. Jesus warns us not to get distracted by the worries of this world. Lift up your eyes and look upward toward God because even in the midst of difficult times our Lord comes to us.”

So, even though the coming of Christ might get crowded out by decking the halls and buying presents, and traveling to see family, and big bills, and broken bodies, let us also stay awake, in hope that God is breaking into our world this Advent season. Let us remember that there is somethin’ bigger than Phil... and war... and disease... and disaster... and hate... and hurt... and loneliness... and pain. Our redemption is drawing near and salvation is coming. A royal welcome is at hand! Today, we welcome hope.

Amen.