

Hoping for the Kingdom of God

Happy New Year! Today, we celebrate the beginning of a new liturgical year. We also begin the season of Advent, four weeks of joyful anticipation as we wait for Christmas and the birth of our newborn Messiah. Each week of Advent has its own theme to help us contemplate Christ's coming and what it means in our lives. The theme of this first week of Advent is hope. And, of course, nothing says "hope" better than a terrifying description from Jesus himself of the horrors that humanity will experience at the end of days.

If you were in church two weeks ago, you may recall Mark's account of a conversation between Jesus and Peter, Andrew, James, and John about the coming destruction of the Temple. This is Luke's version of that same conversation. Here, Jesus speaks to a broader audience and offers a more graphic description of what humanity, and particularly the disciples, can expect. Our lectionary spares us the most upsetting specifics. Suffice it to say that Jesus's community understood the ocean not as a nice setting for a summer vacation, but as a seething stewpot of chaos. So, when Jesus predicts that the nations will be distressed by the roaring of the sea and waves to the point where people will faint from fear of what's coming upon the world, don't picture mildly cloudy skies and gusty ocean breezes. Think of hurricanes and tsunamis, because that's what Jesus's listeners would imagine even if they hadn't already heard the dire predictions that our lectionary skips this morning. They must be scared half to death.

The disciples want to know when these dreadful things will occur. Jesus doesn't give them a definite time, which has driven his followers a little crazy ever since. People like to know what to expect and when it will happen so we can prepare. However, with respect to the "preppers" who cram their houses full of ammunition, toilet paper and canned goods, it's hard to imagine how anyone can realistically prepare for the end of the entire world. Jesus's point is that

a major shakeup “will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” No one will escape unscathed, no matter how many cans of Spam and Spaghetti-O’s they have stashed away. And perhaps we shouldn’t try to escape, because Jesus says that, when the signs start to appear, his followers should know “that the kingdom of God is near.” That’s a good thing, right? And where the coming of the kingdom of God is concerned, shouldn’t we pray that it will come sooner rather than later?

The Reverend Frederick W. Schmidt writes in his book, *Conversations with Scripture: the Gospel of Luke* that Christians tend think of the kingdom of God as a place, a physical realm that will magically appear sometime in the future, sort of like Brigadoon. But if we understand the kingdom to be the working of God's sovereign will in the world, we can see that, as Jesus said, the kingdom is already all around us. Jesus brought the kingdom with him when he incarnated, and the kingdom continues to be with us even though it has yet to fully take shape. We live in a “now and not yet” situation that allows us to help the Holy Spirit build the kingdom wherever and whenever we are. We don't have to wait until the end of days to get started.

As Schmidt observes, that makes the important question not when, but *who*. Who is the God who is coming into the world and whose will is already being done at various times and in various places? If we believe Jesus – and there's no reason for us to be here on this fine Sunday morning if we don't – our God is a loving Father who cares for all of his children while having a special concern for those whom some consider to be the least among us. Our God gives us sensible laws to live by and wants us to enforce them with mercy and love. Our God would rather forgive than punish, which is why he begs us to repent and come back when we mess up. Our God is the king in Jesus's parable who invites everyone, the greatest and least of his subjects, to a lavish banquet, the generous host who would rather throw open the palace doors to all of his

children than banish anyone from the heavenly feast. If we believe that our God is as Jesus describes him, we can do a better job of helping to bring in the kingdom because we can more clearly recognize when the Father's will is being done and when it's being thwarted.

That raises another question about *who*. Who are those who believe the kingdom is coming? And who are those who act on that belief? This is where hope comes in. When Jesus talks about the coming chaos, it's easy for us to fixate on the scary parts, thinking we'll need to protect ourselves and our immediate loved ones. But I wonder whether it's even possible for the kingdom to come fully into the world in its current state. Our social structures very much favor those who already have plenty to the detriment of those who don't. God is going to have to shake things up, maybe pretty severely, to make room for the kingdom to fully emerge. That gives us a choice. We can worry and grieve over what we might lose in the shake up, or we can look forward in hope to the better world that's coming.

Children have a natural talent for hope. As adults, many of us have lived through enough disappointments to make hope seem naive, maybe even a little silly. But if we can live in hope of the coming kingdom, we can start getting ready for it right now. Schmidt offers the example of his daughter who dreamed of becoming a prima ballerina. Great ballerinas are made, not born. Even the most gifted dancers spend years in rigorous training to acquire the discipline, artistic expression, physical strength, and emotional resilience needed to join the corps de ballet. Most start studying in elementary school. Few of us here are still young enough for a career in ballet. Thankfully, though, it's never too late to acquire hope. It just takes practice.

It's unfortunate that so many Christians emphasize judgment over mercy when talking about Jesus's return. They rail about Christ separating the sheep from the goats, leveling dire threats at the sinners who'll end up at his left hand. In my opinion, that's bad theology. Without

encouraging anyone to blow off divine law, I believe that Jesus wants us to obey his Father not because we're afraid of being punished, but because we love and want to please him. Jesus didn't spend his earthly life condemning his followers for every minor infraction. He reserved his harshest criticisms for the religious leaders who tried to rigidly enforce every last jot and tittle of the Father's laws without mercy or common sense. They had their logic, reasoning that Adonai allowed the Babylonians and then the Romans to conquer his chosen people because they hadn't obeyed him perfectly enough. But that reasoning, just like focusing on the tribulations that will precede Jesus's return, ignores the fact that terrible things sometimes just happen through no fault of those who experience them. Our task is to hold onto hope that the best of all possible things, the return of our Lord, will follow once the terrible things have run their course.

Medical science confirms that hope is good for us. In an article for Harvard Health Publishing titled, "Hope: Why it matters," Dr. Adam P. Stern describes hope as "an essential component of our well-being," that defends us against the dread of life's dangers. He warns that hope has to be realistic to remain healthy. Still, he urges us to be "mindful and deliberate about fostering positivity, even in the face of its absence." Like aspiring dancers, we sometimes need to actively exercise our hope, choosing to believe that the trials we experience, individually and collectively, are merely the birth pangs of the emerging kingdom of God where, one glorious day, everyone will be welcome at the holy feast.

This morning, Jesus invites us to clothe ourselves in the armor of light as we remember his birth in Bethlehem centuries ago and anticipate his triumphant return. As we wait, we can work to help the kingdom of God emerge fully into our broken world. And so, we pray. Dear Jesus, fill our hearts with hope this Advent season, that we may be undaunted by whatever storms arise. Give us grace to eagerly await you, whenever you may come. Amen.