

“Draw Near to Hope”

Text: Luke 21:25-36

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First Sunday in Advent - December 2, 2018

It's the First Sunday in Advent. Christmas decorations have adorned shops and stores since just after Halloween. The skating rink in Market Square is in full swing, the candy cane striped street lights are glowing in the Old City, and of course, the giant Christmas Tree on Gay Street looms large and sparkling. Christmas cards begin to trickle into my mailbox, pageant rehearsal is upon us (starting Wednesday!), the Angel Tree is heavy laden with gift requests, and our beautiful Christmas tree with our lovely chrismons glistens before us. We unpack our Advent calendars and wreaths and wait for the angelic announcement that the Christ child is coming to that poor, unassuming teenage girl. “It is the most wonderful time of the year!” yell our radios on repeat.

And yet our first gospel reading for this first Sunday isn't the birth announcement we're expecting. No angels. No Mary. No Joseph. Instead, we hear words of scripture from the end of the gospel of Luke. We turn to a full grown Jesus in the midst of a speech, uttering apocalyptic words that at first glance appear foreboding and frightening. We must listen carefully, for these words invite us to draw near to God's expectant hope.

At the beginning of Luke 21, Jesus is in the temple teaching about the “days that will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” And someone asks him, “What will be the sign that this is about to take place?” Jesus begins giving warnings, describing the false prophets that will appear, the persecution that is ahead for them, and the impending doom of Jerusalem and warns that those in Judea must flee. Suddenly Jesus shifts his language to this apocalyptic drama. “In it, Jesus challenges us, as he did his original hearers in the Jerusalem temple, to look up, pay attention, and be ready.”¹ So today, we are taken not to the beginning, but to the end, right before the plot to execute Jesus unfolds. Hear now the gospel according to Luke 21:25-36. Jesus says,

*25 “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. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, **stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.**”*

*29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, **but my words will not pass away.**”*

*34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 **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.”*

¹ *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, page 23.*

The Word of the Lord.

Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Gate 4-A, a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the Flight Service Person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic]. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “You’re fine, you’ll get there, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.” We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.²

There will be signs. Be alert. Hold your head high, look to cultivate God’s hope when the earth seems to tremble around us. Advent is a time of exciting anticipation, of expecting God’s coming and not avoiding the suffering and darkness but engaging it steadfastly.

It is too easy to give into fear and hopelessness.

It is too easy to shut down and believe that the darkness is too strong, too overwhelming.

² <https://gratefulness.org/resource/gate-4-a-immigration-hope-tears/>

Drawing near to hope, however, is our calling. Stand boldly, alert, with heads held high are the commands we need to heed from Jesus as we await his arrival.

Drawing others into that hope is what we do while we wait for Jesus a second time.

Lost in despair and fear, this old Palestinian woman sinks into a hopelessness that I think too many of us know or have experienced. In the face of distress, when what we know or expect is upended, we are quick to bury our heads in the sand like an ostrich, thinking we are alone and lost. We huddle down into what we think is safe and avoid any signs that appear too risky. Too often we give into narratives based in fear, scarcity, and despair—worldly narratives—not God’s narratives that lead us to hope, mercy, peace, and justice. Yet in her grief, this old woman is approached by another who will not let her sink into the dark abyss. A woman, alert to her need, bravely steps in. Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet, who speaks only broken Arabic, sees the signs of hopelessness, and a small miracle occurs. She embraces this old lady in her despair and helps turn her story into one of hope, a hope that expands and grows and that reaches out to even more; a contagious hope that builds through love in just those few hours together; in turn this old woman shares her hope with those scattered around them and baptises them with powdered sugar from homemade cookies. While they waited for their plane, these women found themselves in this liminal space, strangers unexpectedly bound together by one’s fear and the other’s alertness and willingness to stand tall and engage in another’s despair and transform it. Hope and joy grow unexpectedly in this inbetween place in this small advent story, a holy love showing up unexpectedly in an airport terminal between two strangers.

I don’t know if either woman is Christian, but that doesn’t matter. They endured something together and hope bloomed into something new. I think that’s how we should approach this season.

You see, I think Advent becomes a season of change, letting go, and looking to a future that is not yet clear or known; it is anticipating that change is inevitable and sometimes the earth trembles treacherously beneath us, but our eyes stay fixed on the firm hope that God’s words never pass away. The gospel writer “Luke wrote with a deep and growing sense that Christian discipleship is a kind of living in between - aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.”³ It is living with an expectant hope, a hope that gives us strength, resilience, and perseverance and the ability to approach the signs of despair and darkness boldly.

This is where we find ourselves in this Advent season, a liminal season defined by waiting expectantly for both the Christ child in that lowly stable and the Jesus that will come in full glory when God’s kingdom will fully be revealed. We are pregnant with a hope that is yet to be revealed fully; we grow round with expectation just as a mother’s belly does. We are eager with excitement at what is to come, but aware too that much is to be done in the meantime. Just as an expectant mother doesn’t wait idly for her new child as it grows in her womb, but prepares and readies her home and life for what is to come, we do the same; but our preparation means means boldly witnessing to what God has accomplished already in Christ and laying a foundation that can withstand the tumultuous signs that are to come. We lean on stories of hope fulfilled, of Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Joseph.

If you’ve ever been through childbirth, you are well aware of the signs indicating that your body is about to bring forth new life; and typically I hear it’s pretty painful, and so you try and prepare through research, classes, and hearing others’ experiences. Ultimately, the hope of holding that tiny human is what gets you through the trials of birth. But it is still painful. The body must go through a major trauma in order to bring something miraculous forward. Jesus indicated that the same is true for us and the redemption that we await; the signs that we will encounter will be difficult, the earth upended

³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 23.

and the nations in distress—not something we typically want to hear during Advent. But this is the message that we need to hear, not society’s escapism that all will be well if you just buy this or that. Instead, our message is to embrace the hope that Jesus will transform the trembling earth into God’s peaceful kingdom bursting full of new life.

And so waiting, watching, looking for Christ, preparing our hearts, our loved ones, and our communities by building our faith is how we prepare and live through the tumultuous signs that surround us even now. We actively wait, drawing on the hope that Christ gives us as fuel to respond to the fear and upheaval that Jesus tells us is to come and is presently already here. We actively wait, alert and ready, because on the other side is something truly awesome, God’s new life for us. This is what we hope for.

As people of faith, as people of hope, we are right in the middle of all of it, many of us in the terrors of labor pain currently, unable to find relief from poverty, illness, racism, violence, and death. Many of us feel forgotten or abandoned while many of us thrive. And so the question becomes: “How are we going to live in the midst, in this in-between time? What are we going to witness to?”⁴ How do we endure the labor pains and help others endure their suffering? How do we stand boldly and not give into the hopelessness and rewrite the narrative that God will not let our suffering endure forever.

This passage forces us to reckon with the realities of this world now, both harsh and joyful. This passage forces us to confront the hopelessness and upheaval that many are living in right now if we are to recognize the signs of redemption that await us.

We are not immune to these signs that Christ names; they do not skip over us simply because we have faith - all of us have stories of pain and suffering. No, instead, Jesus says we are able to withstand them with head erect, alert and standing tall, knowing that all we have in this life may pass away; all we have in this life is fragile and disposable, able to be taken away in a single breath. But what never fails or passes away is God’s word. That is the hope that we cling to. That is what scripture shows us over and over again, that our God is faithful and will hold true to his covenant people. That is the hope of the season we enter into now.

“The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us. Just as the leaves on the fig tree offer hope in late winter that summer is coming again, so God’s word, in Jesus, promises us new life. Advent offers us expectation and hope for something new.”⁵

“I sometimes wish Advent was as simple and easy as opening a little door on the calendar, eating a piece of chocolate, and knowing that Christmas is one day closer. But it’s not. You and I both know the world is not that simple and life is not that easy. Maybe that’s why...on this day, the First Sunday of Advent, we...hear a gospel text (Luke 21:25-36) that seems to describe the end of the world and the signs that will accompany that ending. This is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples. This is your story and my story. We experience it in our lives. We see it in our world. And today the Church declares it to be the good news of Christ.”

‘There will be signs’ are not Jesus’ words of warning and threats. Jesus does not ask us to predict the future. He never says these are the signs that the end of the world has come. Instead, he says that when we see the signs we are to stand up, raise our heads, and know that help is on the way; our redemption, our healing, our Savior has drawn near.”⁶

Draw near to hope.

⁴ <https://www.fhcpresb.org/worship-music/sermon-archives/2009/11/hanging-onto-hope-luke-2125-36/>

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, page 25.

⁶ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2015/11/30/there-will-be-signs-an-advent-sermon-on-luke-2125-36/>