

November 28, 2021
"Stubborn Hope"
Luke 21:25-36
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

This week we're talking about hope. Next week peace, then joy, then love in our Advent progression.

But this week, hope. STUBBORN hope. RELENTLESS hope. What Dr. King once called "infinite hope." What Emily Dickinson famously described, in poetic form, as "the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul— / And sings the tune without / And never stops—at all."

Based on the scripture lesson John just read for us, hope may not be the first thing that comes to mind.

If you were with us for worship two weeks ago, you'll recall that we heard our FINAL lectionary reading from the gospel of Mark – unmistakably apocalyptic in Jesus' description of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, of warring nations and kingdoms, earthquakes and famines. What he called "but the beginning of the birthpangs."

This morning we get more of the same, but this time in our FIRST reading from the gospel of Luke, as we begin a new lectionary cycle with the season of Advent. And so we begin as we ended, with the "revealing" and "uncovering" of apocalypse.

And remember – as we considered two weeks ago – that apocalyptic literature like this represents a creative and dramatic response to the harsh reality of community pain and suffering; in this case, within the very real and oppressive context of Roman occupation, AND SO "revealing" and "uncovering" in spectacular, intentionally evocative fashion, an imminent future in which God ushers in a new era.

The good news where the world as we know it is finally turned right-side up after being, and feeling so decidedly, upside down. Where suffering ends and justice prevails. Where new life emerges even from the ashes of death and destruction.

Apocalyptic literature comes off as fearful to get our attention, to wake us up, but it is meant to inspire hope that, as Sam Cooke wrote and sang, “a change is gonna come.”

That’s what Advent means, literally a coming. During the four weeks of Advent, leading us to Christmas, we wait, expectantly, with HOPE, preparing for the divine promise of change, redemption, to come. To be birthed anew.

And so we begin, again, as we ended.

“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.” We can hear in these words the earth itself crying out for justice. Two thousand years later, we hear the earth itself crying out for justice.

It is so easy for us to “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” what in fact we have brought on ourselves with global warming and climate change. Politicians and captains of industry, whose wealth and power depend on fossil fuels, willfully bury their heads in the sand out of shortsighted greed. But the truth is, MOST of us, willfully or not, bury our heads in the sand because we don’t know what to do. Because we’re overwhelmed, afraid, tired, or cynical that change is possible.

“Stand up and raise your heads,” Jesus says, and prepare for change. For justice. “Look at the fig tree,” he says, “and all trees” for that matter. “As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” The kin-dom of God, in fact, is already near.

See the signs not as the end of the world but as the beginning of the change, merely the end of the world as we know it. Advent officially represents the time between the first Advent—that is, the birth of Jesus—and the second Advent, his triumphant return in the form of the promised kin-dom of God. So Advent calls our attention, each year, to what it means to live “in between”—in between what is and what is not yet. The world as it is and the world as it can still be.

So let your fear turn to hope for what is surely coming but is not yet – where hope, as someone once said, “is putting faith to work when doubting would be easier.” Doubting IS easier, but it comes at a price, so get on to the hard work as co-creators of a new creation.

Jesus goes on: “Be on guard so that your hearts,” your HEARTS, “are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

Dissipation, the Greek word *kraipale*, the squandering of money, energy, resources, is, of course, exactly what we’re doing when it comes to global warming and climate change. When it comes to injustice of any kind, for that matter. Squandering what is more than enough for all.

Don’t be weighed down with DISSIPATION and drunkenness and the worries of this life, Jesus says. This is not an instruction for individual morality; it’s a COLLECTIVE appeal to do everything we can to keep our hearts soft and our eyes on the prize. We NEED each other to keep our hearts soft and our eyes on the prize. To pay attention so that any fear we carry may turn to hope, grounded IN and working TOWARD the vision of God’s coming, life-giving kin-dom of love and justice, abundance for all.

Emily Dickinson again: “Hope is a strange invention— / A Patent of the Heart— / In unremitting action / Yet never wearing out—.”

Doubting IS understandably easier. Resignation is easier. Apathy and indifference is easier. Burying our heads, willfully or not, in the sand IS easier. But we all know what happens when doubt and resignation and apathy and indifference take over our hearts; when fear and foreboding and worry and despair replace hope.

It’s a DEATH trap, Jesus says, a slippery slope to the worst that we as human beings are capable of doing – AND allowing to happen – to ourselves and each other and the planet.

So Jesus – through the simple visual of a sprouting fig tree – calls us to replace our fear with hope, in unremitting action, never wearing out. Because summer is already near. Because God's kin-dom is already near.

I have shared before at Calvary that I had the great privilege, when I was in seminary, of taking a short course with Dr. Vincent Harding, may he rest in peace. A longtime civil rights and peace activist, a contemporary and friend of Dr. King, a scholar and theologian.

Beyond the course, I remember, like it was yesterday, a campus-wide assembly featuring Dr. Harding. He shared some remarks and then opened the floor to questions. There were probably a few hundred people gathered, and I remember a friend of mine asking him a question. She was a single mom, dealing with a variety of struggles as she worked her way through seminary. She asked Dr. Harding, in light of everything he'd been through in his life and in the struggle for justice, how he stays hopeful.

He paused for a moment, looked her in the eyes across the gymnasium, and said, "My sister, there are plenty of reasons to feel hopeless, and there are plenty of reasons to feel hopeful. I simply choose to focus on the latter."

This, I think, is what Jesus is saying. Control what you can control. There will be signs, there ARE signs, realities, that understandably leave us feeling hopeless. But there are also signs, ALWAYS signs, if we're paying attention, that remind us that the kin-dom of God is nearer than we think.

So do everything in YOUR power, your individual and collective power, to keep your attention squarely focused on THOSE signs that inspire hope, hope against all hope. That keep hope alive in you and in the world, and with it the HARD, ONGOING work toward God's kin-dom FULFILLED. God's kin-dom revealed, uncovered, in the true meaning of apocalypse.

Hope, as Jan Richardson suggests in her poem of blessing, "that is not just for someday but for this day." Hope "not made of wishes but of substance, . . . of sinew and muscle and bone, . . . that has breath and a beating heart, . . . that will not keep quiet and

polite, . . . that knows how to holler when it is called for, . . . that knows how to sing where there seems little cause, . . . that raises us from the dead—not someday but this day, every day, again and again and again.”

So be on guard, Jesus says. Keep watch. Pay attention. Keep hope alive and PERCHED in your soul, today and EVERY day, again and again and again. EXPECT God's kin-dom to come, and live accordingly. That, friends, is our divine calling and our Advent invitation.

May it be so.