

December 1, 2024
“Hope with Claws”
Luke 21:25-26
Cara Blouin

In the City of Philadelphia you can be fined \$200 for feeding pigeons. Per instance.

That is information a lot of people will offer you if you carry around a quart-sized Ziploc bag full of peanuts and sunflower seeds.

Which I do.

I love pigeons. I don't know why it is illegal to give them food. They were raised and bred as fancy pets for aristocrats in Europe. Now they live in the SEPTA station and are referred to as “rats with wings.”

The poet in our second reading, Caitlin Seida, pulls up for rats—another resilient creature eking out a life in the margins of our human catastrophe. Seida's poem is written as an answer to the Emily Dickinson staple about hope, which goes;

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

Seida is not feeling this poem, and I get it. I am dispositionally resistant to being told to look on the bright side.

If it can be said in italic font printed over a stock image of a sunrise, I pretty much don't want to hear it.

So much so that when I suspect that when my eyes are being forcefully directed towards the silver lining I'll double down on my own hopelessness just out of spite.

And it's been getting worse. It used to be when I heard about some horrible thing that happened in my neighborhood or in my world, there was space for my heart to break. I could cry with rage.

These days, more often than not, I smirk. Oh, did the president say that immigrants are poisoning the blood of the nation? Is the Department of Education going to be eliminated? What did you expect? I don't want to say I told you so, but I've been telling you so for some decades so ... smirk.

When it feels like the alternative is to break permanently down, I might, instead, craft an excellent very cutting joke about the news and send it to the group chat. I am Gen X. Cynical irony is my mother tongue.

The essayist Rebecca Solnit in her wonderful book on hope in progressive movements calls this "the somber pleasure of condemning things" and she empathizes with those of us who use it to contain our heartbreak. It is hard to be a person who loves in such a jagged world.

The danger, Solnit argues, is that this style of coping tends to leave progressive people with "the souls of meter maids and dogcatchers." When you feel powerless to impact real change, in a culture where you consistently get the message that changing things is up to you, condemning can feel like the only power left.

Given the option between smug cynicism and forced optimism, I have to admit being cynical feels more true. But it isn't. Really, neither of those is.

What is true is that I'm heartsick. And that I'm tired.

And it's Advent.

In the same way that a true and meaningful sadness can get papered over with optimism, advent tends to get drowned out by all-caps CHRISTMAS. We get very focused on the LIGHTS!

As though darkness' sole function is to provide an excuse for more light.

But lights at this time of year, whether it's Diwali or Hanukkah or advent, are traditionally lit as a companion to the natural darkness that is here at this time.

Advent is SUPPOSED to be dark.

The Christianity I grew up in read our passage from Luke today with a kind of similar misplaced focus. We were supposed to be ready. Because when Jesus came—and nobody knew when he was coming—but when he came, he'd take a look at what we were doing at that moment, and if he liked it, we were getting ice cream Sundaes for eternity and if he didn't we were getting dragged to hell.

Like that old bumper sticker: Jesus is coming! Look busy.

In my church we thought of "today" or "right now" as not worth considering, almost embarrassing. Just the place where we stayed ready, full of anxiety that we might get caught.

But as Pastor Tim said last week, that is not who Jesus is.

Jesus is not an Elf on the Shelf.

And when he says in Luke, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life," what if he doesn't mean, "Don't let me catch you acting a fool."

What if he means that being drunk-hearted, caught up in daily slights is not a good way to live on its face?

Dissipation means "squandered." I looked it up.

What if instead of being warned that there's a holy speed camera up ahead, we are being asked not to squander what is actually here NOW.

What if when the leaves sprout that means summer is here, and when we faint from fear and foreboding that means God is near. Not near in the future, with a clipboard to judge us, but near. And we don't have to do anything.

Virginia Woolf wrote, "The future is dark, which on the whole, is the best thing the future can be."

To her, dark didn't mean terrible, it might have meant unknown. Dark meant dark.

Advent is the time in the liturgical calendar when we wait for a birth. Advent is womb dark. That's a beautiful kind of darkness. A darkness in which nothing is required but to grow naturally.

Christmas is something you do. Optimism is something you do. Being a good boy or girl for Santa is something you do. These are injunctions, they are projects. They contain the belief that YOU are responsible for what happens next and carry all the anxiety and shame that comes with that belief.

But hope is not like that, and neither is Advent.

If we stop for a minute. If we let it be dark for a minute, we might notice that there is something perched in our soul.

A thing you become aware of when it is still and silent. When it's dark.

That sings the tune without the words, as Emily Dickinson says.

There's a Chinese proverb that goes: "keep a green bough in your heart and the singing bird will come." The singing bird, in this proverb, is I assume some sort of Disney bluebird who is picky about where he perches. The singing bird sings the tune WITH the words, and those words are "hang in there, champ, you can do it."

That's the bird Seida is taking down in her poem.

And.

There is another bird who is less particular. This guy will perch anywhere. Train station, abandoned row home, garbage can. No green bough necessary. Your heart may be a very inhospitable environment, and whether you like it or not, this guy's going to nest.

You've got a pigeon in your soul.

A pigeon is a thing with feathers. They are remarkably soft, if you can get one to land in your hand. (I know you're not supposed to touch them, because they "carry disease," but you're statistically more likely to get a disease from a dog than a pigeon. Just saying.)

A pigeon is a thing with feathers. Beautiful, if you ask me, iridescent purple and green feathers.

But it is also a thing with claws. Like a rat. They're one of earth's most resilient species, despite our pathetic attempts to deter them.

Unlike the bluebird of happiness, the pigeon doesn't bring false cheer. It doesn't avoid what's foul and dirty and gross. The pigeon has no illusions about how the world really is. It doesn't pretend to be living in a lovely arboretum, nor does it complain about its urban home. What a pigeon does, is show up.

I haven't been coming to Calvary long, but I'm onto you. You're pigeon people.

You may sometimes enjoy that somber pleasure of condemning things, sure. But you show up.

You all spent the week getting up and riding the bus and going to work and trying to do what's right when all the options seem terrible.

You've been grieving. You've been worrying. You've been picking up shrieking babies into your exhausted arms.

This morning you got yourself here or onto the zoom and you're listening and singing and hugging everyone. Despite all signs and inclinations, even now you're hoping.

That's the disease pigeons carry. Hope. You're infected, I can see it.

You're infected, and you don't have to do anything. Hope is not a job. It roosts whether you feed it or not, and if you try to remove it, it comes back and nests again, digging in its little claws. It remains in you against your will and without your help despite what is true in the news or in your body or around your family table.

Hope is not Christmas bright, or bluebird pretty. It's slow and daily. It's not done by us or earned by us. Like God in the scripture when we faint from fear and foreboding it is near.

And Advent is not Christmas, it's not supposed to be. We are not supposed to live a calendar of Christmases and Easter Sundays.

There is, instead, a time to every purpose under heaven. This is our time to listen to what's actually here. Now. To be honest and mindful about what we don't have to and cannot do. To trust, through our hope that something is growing and that growing is more than just a prelude to the moment of birth. This is our time to be still in the womb dark, and wait.

To feed the pigeons.

Amen.