

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, November 27, 2016

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob, come,
let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said:]

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Let us pray...Amen.

Well, here we are, in the season of Advent. The modern word advent comes from the Latin word, *Adventus*, which means 'coming', and refers to the coming birth of Jesus.

The early church, around 5 or 6 hundred years after Christ's resurrection, began to observe fasts and prayers 5 weeks before Christmas. Pope Gregory shortened the season to 4 weeks, and the season eventually developed away from fasting and repentance, and took on a more reflective and celebratory tone.

The liturgical colors are purple, sometimes blue, but they echo the liturgical colors of Lent, because it was originally a Lent-like observance.

Each week of Advent signifies a unique aspect of our observance. Many churches use Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy, in varying order to help congregation's focus their attention on the Christ child's arrival.

Advent wreaths are common in churches and in homes, where simple prayers, or even more complex readings are offered.

Today, we light the candle of Hope. So for us, Advent begins with hope: literally and figuratively. This makes sense to me, especially as I began to plan for today's sermon, and started to look for aspects of hope in our faith, and in our faith traditions.

Christianity is one of the more hopeful religions. Each year, we begin our Advent devotions in anticipation of the birth of the Christ child. And each year, at Christmas, we celebrate his birth. You could say that he is born anew each year, in our hearts and in our traditions. But we each know the sacred story of the Messiah's birth, and we retell it every year. And every year, Christmas arrives, right on schedule. We hope for it, and it comes.

Some of our foundational principles of Christianity are based in hope, and hopefulness. Jesus loves us, just as we are. Not as we wish to be, not as others would have us be, but just as we are. Often flawed, rarely perfect, we are loved by our Lord and Savior and our Creator God with our shortcomings and our imperfections intact.

And we are forgiven our sins when we ask, when we repent, when we realize what we have done. This is such a hopeful aspect of our faith!

Even our basic communication with our Lord and Savior and our God is hopeful: prayer is an act of hope. When we pray, we let God know about

the things that worry us, the things that disturb us, the things that frighten us, as well as the things that thrill us, the things that feed us, and the things that lift up our hearts. Prayer is a hopeful act based on faith, trust, and experience. So when we pray, we are participating in a tradition of hope.

Our bible, the sacred Word of God, is a hopeful book. The New Testament contains our Gospel. And the word gospel means 'good news' in Greek. So the central stories of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, his arrest, crucifixion, death and resurrection, are known collectively as the Good News. Their focus on our forgiveness through the Messiah's sacrifice is good news. Our gospels are stories of hope, and they give us hope when life presents us with challenges.

The Christian faith presents us with the concept of the life ever after. The Kingdom of Heaven, and just plain Heaven. Our faith, our traditions, our practices tell us that we need not be afraid of anything, not even death. That our place in heaven is secure when we are secure in our faith. This is amazingly hopeful, and helpful for us when we are struggling. There are few things we fear more than our deaths. But Jesus tells us we need not even fear that!

On this first Sunday in Advent, we are surrounded by signs of Hope. When we act on our faith, we help provide food for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, water for the thirsty, comfort for those who mourn, company for the lonely. And when we are hungry, or thirsty, or homeless, or in mourning, or lonely, we have brothers and sisters who can help us.

When we think we have reached a dead-end, there is a new path to follow. When we've run out of ideas, a new one pops into our heads. When all we have left is our tears and our cries, we have a God who not only hears our prayers, but who promises to love us and protect us and walk with us in the darkest valleys. This gives me hope.

In the midst of chaos, violence, uncertainty, and sometimes even evil, we belong to a faith that offers not only triumph over those earthly things, but victory over eternal things as well. And our relationship with the sacred, with our God, with our Lord and Savior, does not depend on how 'good' we are, no, it depends on whether we believe or not. We make mistakes, but we are forgiven, if we believe. No amount of donations to the church, or a charity, will guarantee forgiveness if we do not believe.

Even our sacred music is hopeful. The lyrics of course describe the many blessings that God bestows upon us, the many blessings we have because of Jesus, but even the very chord structure of many of our hymns end in hopeful major keys. Yes, there are a few hymns that end in minor chords, the ones that are either based on ancient Jewish tunes, or the ones that are written to make us reflect on a particular sadness or issue, like Christ's crucifixion, but the majority of our hymns are hopeful and hope filled, and they can leave our hearts and our souls singing for hours and even days after our worship is over.

And if that isn't enough to convince you that we are a hopeful people, let's take a look at our Advent observances: each week, we introduce more light into the world, by lighting another candle. In fact, this is the opposite of what we do during the Tenebrae, or the service of the shadows on Maundy Thursday, where we extinguish candles until we are in the dark. So Advent, then, is about bringing more light into the world, in order to celebrate the 'Light of the World'. And who wouldn't want more light?

Now, I've spoken about our traditions, about our worship, about our sacred texts. The next thing I want to mention is that our faith practice is based on Jesus coming again into this world. The end times, the second coming, is something we cannot predict, but is something we as Christians hope for, because it signifies yet again a new beginning for the world.

This is what Jesus is speaking about in our good news passage, our gospel reading for today: we must be ready for Jesus to come again into our world. That is our hope, that is our aim.

And how do we do that? How do we prepare when we know not the hour that he will arrive? By always being ready! By practicing our faith each day, each week, each month and year, until he come, or we are taken.

By caring for the least of our sisters and brothers, by welcoming the stranger into our midst with grace and hospitality. By turning the other cheek when we are hurt by another. By going the extra mile, by giving up our shirts too, when someone asks for our coats. There is no shortage of instructions and suggestions from our Lord and Savior in our gospels, we are not without a roadmap in following Jesus.

So what are we to do? What are we to do as faithful followers of Jesus, as faithful children of God, as Christians in a world that is growing increasingly secular, or non-religious?

Today, it's simply to have hope. Have hope in our God, in our Savior, in the future of the world and the universe. For today, it's enough to be hopeful in a world that is mostly hopeless.

We will need to be the lonely single Hope candle, burning in the dark world, defying the dark, against the cold, offering light and warmth as a beacon to the future. Today it will be enough if we become the hope we need to see in the world. Amen.