

December 3rd, 2017

Scripture:

Psalm 80:1-7

Isaiah 64:1-9

Romans 5:1-11

Mark 13:24-37

“Hope”

The stakes are very high at Advent.

Advent cuts to the heart of our faith.

Advent is about a whole lot more than just the baby in the manger in Bethlehem.

Advent may begin with the Bethlehem baby ---- but it ends with the arrival of Christ at the end of time as we know it.

Advent is all about Christ returning in His glory.

In Advent we proclaim and look forward to the second Advent --- the second coming of Christ.

Listen to how theologian Scott Hoezee puts it ----

“If the church cannot proclaim and look forward to the second advent of Christ, then in all honesty there is precious little sense in making much ado about his *first* advent in Bethlehem.

If Jesus is not coming back to make all things new and bring in the kingdom he talked about all through his ministry, then any celebration of his birth really would be on a par with fantasies about Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer or the generic “holiday spirit” with which people try to get infused every December.

If Jesus is not the Lord of lords who can come back at the end of history, then “Silent Night” has all the charm --- and all the meaning --- of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.”

“If the church cannot proclaim and look forward to the second advent of Christ, then in all honesty there is precious little sense in making much ado about his *first* advent in Bethlehem.”

These are helpful words.

Words that save us from getting too comfy and cozy and sentimental about Advent and Christmas.

Words that remind us that Advent is really about the end of time as we know it.

Indeed the season of Advent used to be placed at the end of the church year and not its beginning --- and there was a far greater emphasis on the final return of Christ as opposed to His birth.

That’s why our reading from the gospel of Mark for the first Sunday of Advent is all about the end of time as we know it --- the return of the King.

In many ways our reading from Mark’s gospel today stands in stark contrast to what we might expect.

We lit a candle of hope --- light ----- when we think of Christmas it always includes light --- and lights --- Christmas lights --- Jesus the light of the world --- Advent candles.

And then Mark shakes us up a bit today ----

“the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light:
the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

“the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light:
the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

No sun --- no moon --- no stars ---- this in the days before electricity ---- it would have been total darkness.

Dark ---- dark ---- up at the cottage ---- out in the middle of nowhere ---- no streetlights --- no city lights ----- no flashlights ---- dark.

Not exactly how we often imagine the message of Advent ---- darkness -----
----- and yet the Christian church in its infinite wisdom chooses this passage
every third year --- to open the season of Advent.

“the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light:
the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

This is the world to which Christ will come --- this the world to which Christ
is already coming ---- this is our world.

Darkness.

And yet we have hope.

Hope not in Christmas --- Christmas is already over --- He has already been
born and come once.

It's hope is in His return.

To live in hope is never to have reached our goal ---- but always to be on a
risk-laden journey.

Hope sends us on untried paths.

Hope embraces the risks of new departures.

To live in hope is never to have reached our goal ---- but always to be on a
risk-laden journey.

Hope is the yearning and longing and waiting for --- anticipating ----- God
fulfilling His purposes.

Advent is the yearning and longing and waiting for --- anticipating ----- God
fulfilling His promise.

It's looking into a future we know will one day come to full fruition.

For now ----- we're only part way there.

As we say in our Communion liturgy --- “Christ will come again.”

Christ has come --- that's already happened --- we're there.

Christ will come again ---- we're not there yet --- it's yet to be ---- so we're only halfway there.

The Good News is ----- the great news is ----- the best --- the very best ----- is yet to come.

That's our hope.

Knowing that all the misguided efforts --- foolishness ---- self centeredness - --- sin ----- that is so often the mark of this world ---- is temporary --- and passing --- that is our great hope.

And as Mark makes abundantly clear today ---- we don't know when all this foolishness will end --- we don't know when sin will finally be put to rest --- --- we don't know the day and the hour when Christ will return once again.

But we trust ----- we know it will happen and so that is our hope.

Hope isn't --- hope as in --- "I hope my team wins." ----- or --- "I hope I get a pay raise." ---- or ---- "I hope my furnace lasts another year." --- or --- "I hope I get such and such for Christmas."

Christian hope is based on certainty --- not a whim --- or a desire --- or a wish --- but certainty.

We certainly know that God will do what God said and Christ will come again.

Christian hope is --- I know it's going to happen.

In the face of all this other stuff ----- misguided efforts ---- foolishness ---- self centeredness ---- sin --- in the face of all of these ----- there is no cause for panic or anxiety ---- because God is still at work and Christ is coming.

Hope grows out of a certainty ----- not a maybe.

Hope grows out of a certainty ----- not a maybe.

The church responds to the promises of God by maintaining a sense of expectancy and certainty ---- even when everything around us may seem uncertain and riddled with sin.

Hope is putting our stake in the ground and saying the Good News is -----
---- Christ is coming.

Hope isn't wishing ----- it's proclaiming.

“If the church cannot proclaim and look forward to the second advent of Christ, then in all honesty there is precious little sense in making much ado about his *first* advent in Bethlehem. ---- at Christmas

If Jesus is not coming back to make all things new and bring in the kingdom he talked about all through his ministry, then any celebration of his birth really would be on a par with fantasies about Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer or the generic “holiday spirit” with which people try to get infused every December.

If Jesus is not the Lord of lords who can ----- and will ----- come back at the end of history, then “Silent Night” has all the charm—and all the meaning—of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.”

God gives hope ---- we don't and can't have it without Him.

Hope is a certainty born out of a promise --- a divine promise.

John Calvin ---- not one that many would necessarily consider a great theologian of hope said -----

“We should ask God to increase our hope when it is small -----
awaken it when it is dormant -----
confirm it when it is wavering ----
strengthen it when it is weak ----
and raise it up when it is overthrown.”

“We should ask God to increase our hope when it is small -----
awaken it when it is dormant -----
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strengthen it when it is weak ----
and raise it up when it is overthrown.”

Sometimes our hope is small ----- sometimes it is dormant ---- sometimes it wavers and is weak --- and sometimes things happen in this world that overthrow it from time to time.

Sometimes sad things of this world can overthrow our hope --- make us call things into question.

And when that happens --- God provides--- as always.

When the Christians in Rome were losing hope --- God provided Paul.

Paul addresses the loss of hope in Romans today ---- sometimes when we suffer we lose hope --- but Paul reminds us not to despair.

Indeed Paul goes as far to say suffering --- losing our sense of hope ----- can be glorious.

From verse 2 in Romans today ---

“And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Put another way --- suffering --- darkness ---- makes our hope --- our trust --
- our certainty in the beauty ---- goodness --- and truth of God --- all the more powerful.

Think of it this way ---- if a white sheet has juts a tiny little bit of dirt on it --
- and we clean it -- there really isn't a whole lot of change or difference.

Tiny speck of dirt --- removed --- it looks pretty much the same.

Take a white sheet that is covered it dirt and grime and wash it clean ---- and WOW --- suddenly there is a huge difference ----- what was once brown and black is suddenly white again --- and there's a huge difference.

It's the same with the grace of God.

The depth of God's grace can only truly be revealed when the dirt is deep and plentiful.

The depth of God's grace can only truly be revealed when the dirt and grime of sin ---- and ugliness ----- is deep and obvious.

If we are only ever happy clappy Christians ----- unaware that the sheet --- the world ----- isn't just a little soiled but is actually filthy dirty ----- it says of us that we don't have any real sense of the depth of God's grace.

The deeper we go into the darkness and dirt of life --- of ourselves ----- the greater is our sense of grace.

The deeper we go ----- the deeper God can go with us.

If we're afraid to go deeper it says that we lack trust because we don't think grace can or will come with us.

Our reading from Isaiah today is a deep and profound invitation to go deeper ---- and lament even ---

One source I consulted this week spoke of Advent as a time of great lament.

Advent as a time of great lament.

Advent as lament ----- this is certainly evident in the Old Testament passage for the 1st Sunday in Advent this year.

Listen again to our reading from Isaiah --- picking it up a verse 6 -----

“All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”

“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags” --- that a pretty powerful statement.

Perhaps our unrighteous acts are like rags --- filthy ones even --- but to say that our righteous acts --- our good and true ones ---- are like filthy rags ----- that's pretty powerful.

We're in the dark here.

Until Christ comes again ----- we're in the dark here.

And the deeper we go into the truth of our fallenness ----- the deeper we go into the ugliness of sin ----- the deeper we go into the beauty of grace.

Sometimes just how clean something can become is only ever realized when we first realize just how dirty it is.

The true nature and power of grace --- hope --- the certainty of God's goodness --- beauty --- and truth ----- is only ever appreciated and intensified by the depth of sorrow and darkness.

And Isaiah takes us deep into the reality of hope and of grace today ----
 "All of us have become like one who is unclean,
 and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
 we all shrivel up like a leaf,
 and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

When we come to embrace that reality ----- we see the true power --- and beauty of God --- precisely because we know that He takes the dirtiest of dirty and makes it shine radiant --- and beautiful.

When Mark says -----
 "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light:
 the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

It's not meant to depress.

"When Isaiah says ----
 All of us have become like one who is unclean,
 and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
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Hope is only ever made real when there is the realization of a need for it.

Knowing that we need Christ ---- knowing that there is going to be the second coming ---- is our profound proclamation --- and declaration ---- that we need Him.

The beauty of Advent ----- and the focus of Advent is ---- we need Him ---- He's coming and we need Him to come.

That's what we're all excited about at Advent ----- He's coming.

And we can only ever truly appreciate the need for Him if we first come to grips with the fact that without Him it's a disaster.

If we think that everything is just fine --- that why do we even need Him?

We need Him precisely because we know that it isn't fine.

I get Advent as repentance.

Advent as repentance is ----- "We need you to come Jesus because it's all gone wrong."

Advent is ----- "We need to you to come Jesus because we can't fix it ourselves."

That's advent hope --- we need to you come --- we know you will come --- we know you are coming --- because we can't do it ourselves.

"We should ask God to increase our hope when it is small -----
awaken it when it is dormant -----
confirm it when it is wavering ----
strengthen it when it is weak ----
and raise it up when it is overthrown."

And that is what we are doing here today.

Talking about hope.

Putting our stake in the ground ---- and claiming our --- declaring our hope in Him coming again.

He is our certitude.

And so we wait for Him ----- and we wait with great anticipation.

He's on His way.

He'll be here ---- someday ----- someday just as God intends it --- just when God intends it.

He is our hope ---- and our hope is certain.

We need you Jesus ---- thank you God that He ---- you ---- are on your way.

Amen.