

Sermon for Sunday, December 2,

“Grounded in Hope”

Last Monday our 3rd-5th grade youth group, Route 345, got a jump start on Advent. We talked about how on the first Sunday we change the color of our paraments from White—which was for Christ the King Sunday—to purple—because purple is the color that represents repentance as well as royalty—so purple helps us remember that we are watching and waiting for Jesus to be born and for him to one day come again. We also talked about the five candles in the Advent wreath—each candle represents a different word: hope, peace, joy and love, with the middle candle being the Christ Candle.

Our lesson that day focused on the first word hope—each student colored a three sided ornament—one side holding a picture of candles like the Advent wreath, another had the word hope, and the third side had a sentence for students to complete: It said “I’m hope-fully waiting for...”

So of course we talked about how we are all “hope-fully” waiting for Christmas Eve and Christmas morning—which led to a long list of the things we are “hope-fully” going to see under the tree... We also talked about the food we’re waiting to eat, the family we will get to see, and the traditions that go with Christmas, and more than one student said that they are hope-fully waiting for peace.

I have to admit—after that lesson I was a little surprised to read the lectionary text for today...because it’s not exactly what we expect to hear on the first Sunday of Advent...Instead of angels appearing to Mary and Joseph, or hearing Mary’s Magnificat, instead of wisemen traveling great distances or shepherds in the field, we get apocalyptic Jesus...Not exactly the text, full of hope, I was hoping for.

And yet, I think there might be some rhyme or reason to why this is the story we are using to start the season of Advent—a time when we are hope-fully watching and waiting for Christ to come again.

Our story for today is part of a longer apocalyptic discourse—Two weeks ago, we heard the story of the destruction of the Temple from Mark’s gospel—for Luke, the destruction of the temple is part of chapter 21 and is linked to what we hear today about signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, these are all part of what Jesus says the disciples can expect to see in the final days.

This kind of apocalyptic literature is found in both the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Joel all hold apocalyptic visions, while the most well known Apocalyptic literature of the New Testament is the book of Revelation.

These writings have led to all kinds of interpretations, and an entire industry of novels and movies. Yes, I admit I read one of the left behind books.

Many of these books and interpretations attempt to draw direct parallels between the visions in the book of revelation with what’s happening in the world today. Which leads to all kinds of dire predictions and guessing about when the end will come...

But the intent of this literature wasn’t necessarily to give detailed understanding of what to look for when the end is near, and it certainly wasn’t meant to instill fear or confusion. The word Apocalypse comes from a Greek word meaning revelation or unveiling.

So through these writings something is revealed or unveiled—the question is what?

In most Apocalyptic literature, we get two sides to a story—In Luke we hear about events happening on earth; the destruction of the temple, persecution, and natural disasters. We also hear about what’s happening on a cosmic level—the Son of Man coming in on a cloud with great power and glory...

It's almost like getting to go to a play and as the play is happening, the curtain separating the front and the back stage is lifted—and we get to see what's happening on and off stage at the same time.

This unveiling was important because Apocalyptic literature was originally written to communities that were suffering and facing persecution—whether from invading foreign armies or being sent off to exile and experiencing oppression from the governing powers—these writings were meant to provide encouragement by lifting the veil between heaven and earth and offering a reminder—that no matter what is being faced on stage here on earth, whether it's creation in an upheaval, oppressive rulers and corrupt empires—there is something else happening off stage in the cosmic realm—God is working to bring God's kingdom of peace, joy, love and justice, here on earth.

So instead of instilling fear and questions about whether or not what's happening in the world around us is pointing to the end—these writings were meant to provide communities with comfort and most importantly words of hope.

But nestled within the words of comfort and hope, there are also words of warning. In verse 34 Jesus says “be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that the day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap...”

It's like Jesus knows us...even when we are in need of comforting words and being reminded that God is ultimately in control, we also need to remember, that when life is going well, we are called to still be actively watching, waiting and working for God's kingdom.

And honestly this is where I think the story gets challenging for us. Because unlike the original audience of Luke's gospel—we are in a much different situation. Instead of being on the outside of and persecuted by the Empire we are on the inside. Which means, that when we're honest with ourselves, we might not see the collapse of the current empire and the true establishment of God's kingdom as a good thing.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Justo Gonzalez writes

“Many of us are so well installed in the present order that we look at its passing not with hope, but rather with dread...we convince ourselves that the kingdom of Christian hope is a nice idea, but little more than a chimera. It is not rational. It is the expectation of a bygone age of superstition, still kept alive by ignorant people who should know better. But perhaps our thinking on this matter is tainted by our own secret hope, which is no longer the hope for the new order, but rather the hope that the present will never pass away. And so, just as Augustine used to pray, ‘Give me chastity, but not just yet,’ we pray, ‘Thy kingdom come,’ and then silently add, ‘but not just yet.’”

When you stop to think about it, it really is a strange thing that as a church, we retell the same stories from the same book, again and again and again and again. Each year, we celebrate Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Ordinary time...Why in the world aren't there new stories?

But when we take a step back, telling the same stories over and over again, offers us an opportunity--like a checkup at the doctors office—each year, during the season of Advent we have the chance to ask the question again—in what is our hope grounded?

This is the beauty of Advent—over the next four weeks, in this sanctuary we will retell our stories of faith, we will look at the beautiful new banners, as well as the purple paraments around us, and we get to ask ourselves the question--which empire do we ground our hope in—do we find hope in the empire of this world, the systems and structures which are broken and oppressive—but which are also at the same time tempting like a trap...Or are we watching, waiting and working...

Are we watching...

Are we waiting...

Are we working for God's kingdom of love, peace and justice to break-in right here and right now—even in the city of St. Louis.

So...as we begin this hope-full season, where is your hope grounded?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

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