

Advent 1C  
The Rev. Emily Richards  
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*A Season of Hope*

Many of us are still recovering from the turkey and mashed potatoes and the family gatherings of Thanksgiving. The malls having been playing Christmas carols and displaying decorations since Halloween. Santa arrived in Herald Square and Black Friday has come and gone. It's official. We have ushered in the season of glad tidings and good cheer. Gathering here for worship on this first Sunday in Advent we find ourselves in for a rude awakening. Every year Advent seems to throw us off guard a little. There are no Christmas trees or lights or carols sung here. We do not encounter the young mother, Mary and her sweet newborn in his cradle, the shepherds keeping watch or the singing angels. Instead we hear the voices of Old Testament prophets, crying out from their own wilderness places, places of devastation and exile. We hear Jesus, days away from his crucifixion, teaching in the temple about the coming catastrophe and the end times. These alarming and uncomfortable texts today and throughout the Advent season sure do seem to dampen our holiday spirit.

Advent is a time that demands a different kind of preparation than what our culture beyond our church walls do. We are to sit in the darkness and wait upon the One who is to come among us as a vulnerable child born in a stable. We are also to wait upon the One who is to come among us in great power and glory. We are to be on the alert for God's Kingdom to break forth, trusting in God's promise that the day of redemption is near. Advent, therefore, is a season of hope and reminds us that we are a people of hope.

Since the turn of the century, movies such as the newly released, *2012*, and the best-selling series, *Left Behind*, have captured our imaginations. We have been fascinated by the apocalyptic themes which focus on the end times and which instill in our culture a great sense of fear and desperation. We, therefore, assume that all apocalyptic literature in scripture focuses on the same. When we look more closely at our Lukan text this morning, we see beyond the frightening images and find within its words a message of hope. We must remember that at the time Luke was writing his Gospel, Jerusalem had been sacked by the Roman army, the temple had been destroyed and in its destructive wake hopelessness remained. Jeremiah's message offered a similar refrain of hope to a despairing people. Oppressed by their own powerful enemy and held captive in a foreign land, the Hebrews were lost.

Both Luke and Jeremiah were writing to people who were wondering how they would ever escape their present darkness. Both offered the same answer, the answer that we hear repeated throughout our Advent days of waiting. In the midst of the darkness, God comes to bring redemption and renewal. Despite all the chaos, the terror, and the devastation swirling around us, despite all that is falling apart in our world and in our lives, Christ is coming again because of God's love for us and the world God made. While exile and suffering remain constant realities, so does God's promise of a redeemed world. This is the hope which Jeremiah and Luke's community's clung to and which has been described by Emily Dickinson:

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers*

*That perches in the soul*

*And sings the tune without the words*

*And never stops—at all*

This is what we Advent people, waiting in this in-between time, are invited to embrace –a hope that never stops at all. As people of hope who believe that the God of love and redemption will in the end triumph, we must be agents of this hope, actively striving and praying for the coming of the kingdom.

Earlier this month I attended a diocesan preaching day with Tony Campolo as the guest presenter. Campolo is a Baptist pastor and Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University. He describes himself as a progressive evangelical. In talking about his own understanding of his faith he said, “ When I was growing up as an evangelical the point of being ‘saved’ was so that one day you would end up in heaven or better yet avoid eternal damnation. Fear played a big role in one’s personal conversion. Now, however, I understand my evangelical Christianity in a different way. The point of being ‘saved’ is so that I can be a part of the radical transformation of the world- so that I can participate in the coming of God’s kingdom here on earth. It’s about how I live my life now and not simply something I am preparing for in the future.” Whether evangelical or not, I think we are all called to be participants in what God is doing even now to bring forth God’s kingdom promised to us in that first Christmas.

The great theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “I tried to present the Christian hope no longer as such an ‘opium of the beyond’ but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in this world.” To be people of hope is to believe not only in what has happened in the past or what we long for in the future, but to believe in God’s power working to transform our world even now and to believe that we can be collaborators with God in God’s great endeavor.

The good news of Advent is that while we sit here and wait, preparing in a very different way for Christmas than our world outside of these walls, we can hear over the din of chaos and fear, the beautiful refrain of hope. This tune makes us alive, alive to God's love for us and our world, alive to the real message and meaning of Christmas. May we use these days of Advent as an opportunity to rekindle this great hope of ours and to share its beautiful refrain with all those who like ourselves need to hear it echoed in the midst of the darkness.