

Signs of Hope

November 29, 2009

Richmond United Church

First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Luke 21:25-36

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Here we go again. Didn't we hear a similar passage last week? It is because we have. We begin this Advent season with one more mini apocalyptic passage. It seems to be in the air for there are several end of the world stories in the movies and TV this Advent season. In unsettled times we get the theme of the times being out of joint.

Art forms use a theme and repeat it so we are moved to look at reality in new ways. In movies and novels the theme is experienced by different characters in the story. You get their perspective. Great music uses variations on theme, little phrases are repeated, until we lifted by the full piece of music. This is to move us from the ordinary and humdrum to the visionary, transcendent and awe creating experience.

Advent is such a variation on a theme. It is the time of introspection so we see an inner reality that is the truth about experience. It is to see the light of God breaking in; that there is a truth that grounds all experience and it is the love of God. Advent, by different movements shakes us, dislocates us so we stand transfixed, open to a new reality, shedding all the things that have held us back, moving us out of the same old ruts of daily life.

This breaking into history by God is unsettling. The old is called into question and there is a sense of not yet. When we have a new insight- a new sense of purpose, a positive sense of our self we do feel different, yet that feeling is hard to hold onto. In the face of daily living we struggle to hold onto the well-being. It is because the sense of well being is not always fully formed. There is a feeling that there could be more.

Our fears of failure, our anxious hunger for money, things, and influence dog us. When we watch the news, read the paper, hear about the issues of our global reality we feel small and impotent. As a result we freeze, have compassion fatigue, feel we cannot overcome the large and small issues that face us.

Our passages deal with this reality. The people have returned from exile and they are in a waiting mode. Justice is still to come. Not every thing is settled.

The Gospel is a reflection on hope in the midst of turmoil. Hope creates the eyes to see in the chaos redemption and hope.

The story of the fig tree reminds us that the power of God is there in the midst of our struggles and is there to carry us. It reminds us that hope does overcome despair if we let it. We find the paradoxical truth that dark has no meaning apart from light. Light is both primal and the final reality and it will not be overcome by that which seeks to quench it. We can see hints of light and hope breaking forth through the dark clouds and space.

We can see light in the life of those who are faithful to God. We see people who witness to the reality of hope in their commitment to the common good. We can see this hope in the stories that we tell one another - in novel, movies, music and TV.

To break the hold of the negative circles of the world requires giving ourselves over to the power of God's love. It is to empty ourselves of ego concerns. Hope takes our natural aspiration for happiness and reorders it to the kingdom of God. Such hope is not optimism about the nature of things. Optimism is unrealistic, for when it fails we are even more undone. Nor is hope a forward looking confidence that all will be eventually be well. Hope is to look at the heart of darkness and live out of the hope for a future God alone can and will provide.

We have all meet people who have immersed themselves in the issue of our time and still exude love and hope. Their devotion to their quest is not based a guarantee of success. They are called to be faithful rather than victorious.

Hope and dedication cannot be sustained without a fellowship - without a community. We cannot sustain hope on our own. It needs grounding. Faith communities ground us and sustain us. When we gather in community, we support one another in a fellowship of hope. We share the vision, the task and the pilgrimage that our contributions make a difference to the common good. Community is founded on a vision of hope. Communities of faith are the training ground of hope. Worship reorients us to see light in the darkness.

Yet, there are times when we don't really believe in the hints of God's power of hope. Sure we like the outward appearances of seasons like Christmas. Do we let it in to transform us? Do we really surrender to Advent's transformational power? Let it get into our feelings and open our hearts to awe. It takes more than an act of will, it needs a spiritual practice to open us to see the light in the darkness. It is to be radically open to God's dream, where all are invited to share. Faith requires us to let go and trust. It is hard to let go and go deeper into the light of God. This is why we need times of silence and reflection. We need a time of waiting, so we prepare ourselves for the light to break in. We need to stop and be quiet and not rush to the end of the season. To see the light of hope requires a change of heart which comes out of deep spiritual practices.

Advent season is a waiting time, reminding us, yes these are dangerous times. Advent waiting is to prepare our spiritual strength so we can stand up and be bold. To have a change of heart. With God's grace we can be filled with hope and courage. We are not undone. We are not alone. We live in God's world.

Our Advent season prepares us to see the reality of a broken world. And the light that breaks in and will continue to break in. This deep story is in competing with the story our society seeks to tell. It is easy to miss

the deep meaning because we do like happy ending stories of births, rather than a birth that leads to death and the end of the way things are.

Advent gives us a time and a story of God's participation in our living. God trusts us and needs us to give what we can to the well-being of the future. Advent is a season of preparation - awe making - light seeking. Preparation begins by letting go, by opening ourselves to the surprising power of hope.

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