

“Looking Forward in Hope”

Jeremiah 33: 14-16, Luke 21: 25-36

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Lynne Dolan

Can you believe it is already Advent? It feels odd when the first Sunday of Advent comes right after Thanksgiving. If you step to the beat of the culture's drum it shouldn't seem odd at all. Perhaps the Thanksgiving leftovers were still warm when you began to plot your strategy for “Black Friday.” For many people the thought of going anywhere near the mall on the Friday after Thanksgiving makes them want to run for the hills. For others, the thrill of the hunt and the promise of amazing bargains make the waiting in those horrendous lines and the rude behavior of fellow shoppers worthwhile. I admit I resist giving into the Christmas machine until the calendar says “December.”

This morning we hear of a different kind of waiting and a different kind of promise. We begin the season of Advent by hearing not about the birth of Jesus, but the warning of his coming to us again long after he has passed from this earth. We know what Advent means...sort of. It is this time before Christmas when we light the candles on the Advent wreath. But Advent is more than that. Advent literally means “coming” or “comes before.” It is a season of preparation, a season of waiting and watching. It is more than waiting for the next great sale or hoping to find the perfect gift for someone you love. The candle we lit this morning signifies a much deeper sense of hope and promise.

We hope and wait this season for the coming of the Christ child. However, we prepare for more than this child's birth. We hope and pray that something amazing will be born within us even as we wait. The story we hear today reminds us that we can always be hopeful, as we wait and anticipate an encounter with Jesus. We don't necessarily long for an encounter with the Christ child. We long for a life-changing encounter with the Jesus that reminds us what it means to be his disciples. In Advent we prepare ourselves to receive this great gift and recommit ourselves to follow the one who came into our world to embody peace and justice, hope and love.

If you listen to the story from Luke's gospel you may wonder where we get this message of hope. It sounds rather gloomy. It sounds like Jesus is telling us the world is coming to an end so we better get ready for this terrible thing to happen. There is little here that sounds very hopeful. I imagine it is a sign of hope that Jesus was born into this world to begin with. It gives us hope that even though he suffered and had to experience very difficult things, he never gave up. It gives us hope to know that when we feel anxious or scared we can pray to Jesus to give us the courage and strength to face what is difficult in our lives too. It gives us hope to know that we are part of a community that stand with us when things are the most difficult, that people will support us, listen to us, be honest with us, that they will share their love by holding our hand or bringing us meal.

I received a simple sign of hope this week. I recently had eye surgery. It went well and I was not terribly concerned about it. However, it was delightful to receive a card from Christian Service wishing me well and making me laugh. My healing was helped by this simple gesture of love. In this season of Advent I invite all of us to look for those signs of hope. The sanctuary was full last Sunday afternoon as we came together for a special Thanksgiving worship led by our Middle School youth group. Three young women shared why they are thankful; for this church and the love they experience here, for family trips that were filled with wonderful memories of a Grandfather's love, and for friends that are faithful no matter what happens. They shared their gifts in music and story telling. They invited us to sing a new song. It was a clear sign of hope.

Jesus reminds us that there are signs of hope all around us. If we are worried and anxious we may miss these signs. We can count on God's love just like we can count on spring to follow winter. In March, when we have shoveled our driveway for the umpteenth time and worry that our kids will go to school in July thanks to too many school cancellations, the blessing of a warm day reminds us that winter will not last forever. Pretty soon the leaves will bud on the apple tree in our front yard and hope springs eternal. When we are in the middle of the long dark winter, it seems as though the spring will never come. When we are in the midst of a difficult time, it feels like it will go on forever. Jesus encourages us to be open to see the signs of God's presence in our lives.

We all face some challenges at one time or another. Perhaps someone close to you has died this year. Perhaps you or someone you love has been diagnosed with a disease that has brought new challenges. Perhaps you are under the control of a powerful addiction and can't seem to find the help to break its grip. We all face challenges. God can not prevent this from happening to us. When we seek God's help, God will be with us through these difficult moments. This is where we find hope.

Jesus was not in denial about what was going to happen to him and what was in store for the world. Like the prophets before him, he speaks openly and honestly about the future. He does not want to paralyze us with fear, but energize us into action. One writer says, "The real purpose of speaking about the last days is to affect the present ones. Be awake, look reality in the eye and then act accordingly." Denial robs us of our power. Honesty fills us with the power we need to face those challenges head on.

What is the difference between being optimistic and real hope? Can you imagine the difference between wishing for something to be different and experiencing true hope that comes when you have the courage to approach even the most difficult situations with God at your side? Imagine a retired couple that has been married for 60 years. The wife becomes gravely ill. The doctor suggests it is time to consider hospice care. No one is even willing to even talk about it. Or imagine the pain alcoholism brings to a family. Everyone knows mom's "secret," but no one is willing to talk about it. However, no one is willing to say "no" to mom as she proceeds to ruin another holiday gathering. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "a 'no' uttered from deepest conviction is better and greater than a 'yes' uttered to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble." I have this quote posted on

my desk. It helps me be honest with myself and others. It is a sign of hope for me. The ability to be honest and to be unafraid to call it like it is; is a necessity of real hope.

On this first Sunday in Advent Jesus invites us to read the signs of the times. Those signs are not always bad. They are more often very hopeful. The writer David Lose says, “from Moses to Martin Luther King, Jr. history is full of examples of those who, because they had been to the mountaintop, and peered into the promised land, and had heard and believed the promise of a better future, found the challenges of the present not only endurable, but hopeful. We, too, amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life, can ‘stand up and raise [our] heads’ because we have heard Jesus’ promise that ‘our redemption draws near.’” This is the promise we receive today; that God comes to us as Emmanuel, God-with-us. We begin this journey again, the journey of hopeful renewal that brings us all the way to the manger. Look around you. The signs are everywhere. May God give us the faith and courage to not only see, but believe? Amen