

Hope Was Right Here, All Along!
Rev. James Van Schaick
Pound Ridge Community Church
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2018
Luke 21:25-36

I always find the first Sunday of Advent to be a little disorienting. Thanksgiving memories of time with family and friends and eating too much turkey are still fresh in our minds. We come to church to find the tree up, and the wreathes on the windows. You hear beloved Christmas songs everywhere you go. Neighbors are beginning to decorate for Christmas, and no matter what age you are, your heart just seems to feel a little thrill of anticipation for the fun and excitement of the season that is upon us. We begin our service by lighting the candle of hope.

And in the midst of all this blossoming good feeling, what are we greeted with in the lectionary from the gospel of Luke, but Jesus telling his disciples about the end of the world! It comes as kind of a shock to our spirits that have already started getting into a kind of Christmas groove. And Jesus doesn't spare the disciples, or us, the horrible details. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Luke 21:25-26)

It's a frightening picture, perhaps made all the more frightening to us by the fact that with the possible exception of the planets being shaken, it pretty neatly describes the situation we encounter every time we turn on the news. Jesus hits close to home for most of us today. The world political and social situation can seem to us a lot like being at the mercy of a roaring sea, can't it? And Jesus is certainly on point when he talks about our fear and foreboding about what is going on in the world. There are serious issues like the wars, resulting floods of refugees, terrorism, poverty, and threats from the continuing spread of nuclear weapons.

It's small wonder that for many of us, Christmas is an annual chance to run away. We can lose the anguish of the world, even if it seems like only for a moment, in the trees, the tinsel, the gifts, the Rockettes, and the holiday parties. I'm in no way suggesting that's all bad. There is something to escaping, but there has to be something more.

Since you're in here, you at least want to concentrate on things that really matter, but it's hard not to get caught up in all the manufactured hoopla of the season instead. I won't be the first one to speculate that Christ himself must be dismayed by the unbridled consumerism and overindulgence that characterizes the modern

celebration of his birthday. In fact, Jesus might have been looking ahead to Christmas 2018 when he said this to his disciples in today's gospel lesson: "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with [self-indulgence], drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap." (Luke 21:34)

The fact is that the profound hope of Advent represented by our first candle is as different from the temporary "high" of Christmas celebration as day is to night. Unlike our annual Yuletide escapism, real hope – the hope that all of humanity yearns for – is not a way to forget our problems for a while. Real hope has its very roots in the reality that living is hard, but that God is with us in the struggle.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus is specifically talking about the end of time, but I think he's doing more than trying to give us a hopeful vision for the distant future. I think he's also encouraging us to see the presence of God today, in the trials of our daily lives. The cosmic upheaval that Christ describes for the last days is also a metaphor for the upheaval that is happening to all of us right now. I think this scripture is a call for us to reflect deeply on the troubling things that are happening in our world, and to respond to them with a mature faith. And that's really the question today, isn't it: "How do we dare to hope in these difficult times?"

Let me tell you one way to look at it, using something that I have never done, but have always found intriguing. It's something called "mystery vacations." The concept is that you book a "mini-vacation" without knowing where it is you're going. I would imagine that they tell you enough to know what kind of clothing you should pack, but beyond that, you don't know where the destination or what you will be doing there. You just show up at the airport at the appointed time, and go. You find out where you're going when you get there.

I find the whole concept of "mystery flights" interesting. On the one hand, they are a perfect metaphor for human existence. We can make all the plans we want, but none of us ever really knows the destination – how this thing called "life" is going to end up. But they are unlike real life in one important way. If these "mystery flights" were really just like life, then if you were standing at the airport, observing the people showing up for their "mystery flights," you might expect to see people full of anxiety, or even fear. They'd be worried, just like we can be, about the uncertainty that they were facing.

But here's the interesting thing. I really doubt if you see fear much in people bound for a "mystery vacation." I think just the opposite would be the case – that you would find people buzzing with excitement and anticipation. What you would encounter is people savoring the "mystery" – people who can't wait to find out how things are going to unfold. They can be that way for one reason: because they trust the people who planned the vacation. They are confident that the plane will be safe and well-maintained, and flown by a qualified pilot. They're certain that they are going to stay in a comfortable hotel, in a fun place. They would never in a

million years expect that the trip would be to someplace dangerous, or that they might be dropped by parachute into the woods somewhere without a compass.

Now imagine what it would be like for our “mystery” travelers if part of the “mystery” was that the trip begins with a lottery among all the participants to decide which one of them is going to fly the plane. Clearly, far fewer people would be showing up for “mystery flights.” The point is that to face an uncertain future hopefully – with confidence and excitement instead of dread – you only need to trust the one who is in control. And that’s all we really need to face life the same way.

You see, the gospel is not good news because it predicts a bright shiny future where we know all the details in advance. The gospel is good news because it promises that the future is in the hands of someone we can trust. It promises a future based on the faithfulness of God. The irony has always been that, despite all the anxiety and uncertainty in this “mystery trip” of life we’ll all on, most of us still insist on trying to fly the plane!

We often hear Advent described as a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. But paradoxically, it is not an active preparation based on getting all the way through our own to-do lists. But Advent isn’t a time to wait passively, either. Advent is a time of waiting expectantly, of listening, of tuning our spiritual senses so we can be alert to how God intends to make us over in his image – not on some future judgment day, but here, and now.

You see, what sounds like a pretty frightening and dismal message from Jesus is really one of genuine hope. Jesus tells us that just as we see the buds on an olive tree and know that summer is already near, when we see the frightening signs that Jesus is foretelling we can be certain of something else. Jesus says, “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28)

It’s interesting to note that when Christ says that by these signs we will know that our redemption is near, this is the only time that the word “redemption” ever appears in the Gospels. I wonder why he does not say that our “salvation” is near. It’s certainly a much more common word in the New Testament. Perhaps it is because he is talking about more than the hope of having our souls “saved.” He is talking about the hope of being transformed; the hope of a world remade, and the hope of a creation reborn.

He is talking about Advent hope.