

St James United Church

Message for November 28, 2021
The First Sunday of Advent



“The Gift of Hope”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:20-36; “We Wait for You to Ache” by Walter Brueggemann

As I shared earlier, it’s customary to designate each Sunday in Advent as a time to reflect on the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love. I get why we do this for the next three Sundays, but I struggle seeing the First Sunday’s gospel selections as hopeful, especially this year. Given the state of the world, including storms that brought destruction in BC, then Cape Breton, Labrador and on our southwest coast, I tremble at the thought of ominous signs in the sky and portents of pounding waves. Like the nations in the reading, I fear for the future, both in the near term as a new variant of coronavirus is discovered, and the long term as we face an increasingly chaotic climate as well as rising authoritarianism, racial division and conflict in many parts of the world. I find myself praying for the Child of Humanity to appear on the clouds to deliver us.

But we can’t expect divine rescue now, any more than people could in the past when they looked at their situation, be it a war, pandemic or disaster of some kind, and likewise prayed for God to intervene. Knowing that an outside rescue isn’t coming can lead to despair. In fact, that is a risk for many of us as the pandemic drags on. But then I read Walter Brueggemann’s poetic prayer and realize I’m looking at hope all wrong. He writes, “we wait for you to ache and hurt and care over us/and with us/and beyond us,” praying for God to attend to us not just with power but mercy. His prayer reminds me of times of crisis and heartache I’ve gone through. Difficult as they were, they were also times of growth as I discovered a strength that I didn’t know I had, one that broke through my false sense of independent isolation, from a source bigger than me. This was heightened as I reached out to others for support, and they drew from their experience to help me through mine. It was in this sharing of compassion that I discovered power to keep going, and I’ve done the same for others. We find something similar in shared action, something we’ve seen recently on both Canadian coasts as people have rallied in response to flooding and other storm damage. In each I see a reversal in what Jean sang. I find hope in knowing that I’m not alone after all.

Perhaps this is where God rescues us, not outside of our power and mercy, but within it. There is a saying attributed to Augustine that “without God, we cannot, and without us, God will not.” It captures what is sometimes called “participatory redemption”. When we read today’s portion of Luke, we may be forgiven if we see retributive redemption when Jesus says that when we experience war, disasters, other crises, God’s Reign is near. Are these necessary punishment

before God will “remake this alien world into our proper home”? I don’t think so. What if these crises are instead an opportunity for reflection, and so become for us catalyst for change?

This makes sense to me when I read the gospel alongside the quote from Jeremiah about God raising up a branch of David. We rightly hear Jeremiah hinting at the coming of Jesus to usher in God’s Reign; but taking Jeremiah’s words on their own merit, I’m reminded that in the Jewish community some suggest the longed-for Messiah is not an individual but their people as a whole. I find this offers new insight to what we’re celebrating in four weeks. At Christmas we honour more than Jesus’ birth. We ponder the meaning of incarnation, how people experienced God’s living and liberating presence in Jesus. We often think this is unique to him, yet we’re all children of humanity, to use his preferred title. Paul writes that we’re each empowered by Spirit, together the Body of Christ. Perhaps we’re collectively the one for whom we’re waiting, with what we experience in Jesus God’s desire for all of us, God within us in mercy and power, inviting us to grow in love and so participating in our redemption as together we embody God’s Reign.

Now as I say this, I know my words sound naïve. The world feels anything but a proper home two millennia after Jesus’ birth, especially in the last decade as the progress we made feels like it is unravelling before our eyes. How else do I explain why the commitments of various national governments to lower greenhouse gas emissions are still so weak? Or why wealthier nations have stockpiled vaccines at the expense of poorer countries? Or why the RCMP used what many consider to be excessive force when they arrested Wet’suwet’en land defenders along with journalists, and why there were arrests when according to the agreement of a couple of years ago, construction on the pipeline wasn’t to continue until negotiations were finalized? Or how else is the family of slain Black teenager Jannai Dopwell-Bailey left asking why the Québec Premier and Mayor of Montréal attended the vigil for slain but white teenager Thomas Trudel and not for their loved one? And yet, here I actually feel hope. The fact that I’m reading about these things tells me that rather than the situation worsening, the opposite is at play as we have become more conscious of issues of equity than we were a generation ago, even last year. Jesus tells us to look to the fig tree, which appears completely dead in winter but bursts into life each year. It may feel like all is lost, but if we’re awake as Jesus asks of us, we’ll be attentive to the signs of change we see around us, and to our call to be catalysts of it. This is participatory redemption, God present as our awareness is raised, present too in our motivation to act not just in present crises, but asking questions of justice and so committing to make a proper home for all.

Friends, though we are facing difficult times, there is still hope, but not through some end of days divine rescue. Though I may want that when I feel alone, my capacity to fix the situation long gone and I am giving in to despair, I’m never really alone. None of us are. God is present in and through us, weeping with us in our grief, giving us strength to carry on, inviting us to stand with each other and inspiring us to bring about needed change in our world. That is the true gift of hope as together we respond, encourage, and share with each other. May we not just ponder this gift once a year in Advent but draw on it now and into our future. Amen.