

Hope, In Spite of...

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Mary Koon

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Since the dawn of humankind, people have turned their eyes to the heavens in wonder. It's as true today as it has been for millennia, gazing upon the stars in the velvety dark sky can give us a sense of our small place in a world that is enormous and mysterious. It can be a source of inspiration and dreams that dare to become realities.

As we gaze upward with awe and humility, we recognize the truth that the God that created the vast, expanding, swirling, dizzying beautiful universe... is the God who created you and me... and, two thousand years ago, became human in Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us

This year's Advent theme is, "Follow the Star." On the night of Jesus' birth a star shone in the sky directly above the place where the world-changer, justice-bringer, oppression buster, life-giving, infant lay with his young, exhausted mom and proud, bewildered father.

Two centuries later, this Advent season, we too, follow the moving beyond walls of familiarity, comfort and ease, to the places where God dwells. Places that invite us to be inspired, to dream, to imagine and ultimately, find our faith and hope renewed.

With that sense of awe and mystery we turn to two traditional week one Advent readings. The first is from the prophet Isaiah, and the second from the gospel of Mark. Both elicit images that are strange and wondrous, very, very odd to our 21st century ears. The poetry of the words express hopes, yearnings and realities for which there are no simple words. I encourage you to listen with your hearts to these ancient words.

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. AMEN.

We turn now to the Gospel of Mark, with its clipped, urgent language. Mark was written just after the disastrous Jewish revolt against the Roman imperial occupation of Palestine. In 70 CE, Rome's vengeance shattered the people – the imperial armies destroyed the temple, which was the very heart of the Jewish world.

Thus, this passage, according to scholars, is not about the full-on end of the world, but rather, the end of the people's world with the destruction of the temple. Jesus is offering hope in the midst of catastrophe. When powerful forces of wrong seemed to have the upper hand, the ancient response was to envision a time in the near future, after the destruction, when God will lift the veil (the true meaning of apocalypse) revealing God's hidden, dramatic rescue. Mark's writing, in the tradition of the OT Daniel, is poetic and dramatic. Jesus is speaking here:

Mark 13:24–37

“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Prayer – by the power of your Spirit, make these ancient, holy words come alive in hearts, minds, bodies and spirits that they might be living water. AMEN

Advent is a time for waiting... we wait to celebrate, once again, God’s coming to earth as a babe in a manger, even as we wait for the time when God will make all things new. At that glorious time, people will live together in peace, the earth will be whole and healthy, and systems of oppression and injustice will be no more.

So advent is an in-between time, made even more real to us in this time of double pandemics of Covid and racism. Waiting has become familiar territory these days, hasn't it?

We call this kind of waiting liminal time, because things are definitely not as they were, but they are not as they will be, God willing. In the last nine months, we have born witness to the world's systemic inequalities, and deep divides, widespread, communal grief and worldwide anxiety, but also to our shared humanity, creativity, and the inescapable fact that our lives are connected.

The specific day and hour of the fulfillment of God's kingdom on earth is a mystery to even Jesus. But the promise remains. The God that listens to the cries of people, the God who became one of us, who weeps and laughs with us, who liberates and shows us the way to abundant life will never give up. God is our hope.

Jesus encourages us to stay awake, to be alert to the spirit moving in our lives, enabling us to participate in God's future until it comes.

So we wait...actively, intentionally, lighting one more candle each week until Christmas, illuminating the peace, power and beauty of God with us.

Today we light the candle of hope.

The one thing I know for sure about hope is that it happens in spite of. In spite of the evidence all around that things are not okay, hope keeps shining. Hope is God's yes as we swim in a sea of no.

Hope does not deny the pain of the present, but is confident that God holds us steady, and because of that, we can look toward a transformed future.

The late pastor (of Riverside Church in NYC) and peace activist William Sloane Coffin said this,

“Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart's full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So while I'm not optimistic, I'm always very hopeful.” Hope arouses a passion for the possible.

I went looking for stories that embody that “passion for the possible,” and found quite a number of them. I want to share a couple that deal with a situation close to home, one that has effected all of us.

This summer, Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz Weber, addressed a group of Presbyterians on the subject of “unprecedented hope”. She said this:

Ingrid Rasmussen pastors a Lutheran church in South Minneapolis – the church that happens to be directly across the street from the police precinct that was burned down in protest of George Floyd’s murder. The day after it burned Ingrid posted a video showing us the scene around her church – police in riot gear, smoke rising, helicopters overhead. A few minutes into the video you realize Pastor Ingrid is moving a little slowly because she is 8 months pregnant. Before the video ends she’s in tears, both about her community burnt down around her, but more so about the generational pain and injustice that caused the upheaval - and in a halting voice she reminded us of “Harlem” the Langston Hughes poem ...that what happens to a dream deferred is that it explodes. Her congregation, by the way has been transformed into a massive food bank and community organizing center and is feeding and providing services to their community in profound and needed ways as they rebuild. I think I saw the real thing in that video – like, actual hope. It was a hope of the

Christian variety because it was the kind of hope that still stands after being drudged through Good Friday first.

<https://nadiabolzweber.substack.com/p/unprecedented-hope>

As people of faith, we stand on the shoulders of our spiritual ancestors who had hope... Abraham, Sarah, Isaiah, Mary, Joseph and so many other. People who trusted God's promises through famine, plague, diaspora and occupying forces and envisioned a future of freedom, forgiveness, justice and love.

And just yesterday I received a text from a sister in Christ, Reverend Joan Austin. Joan is a police chaplain in the 5th precinct in Minneapolis. In the summer, she organized an effort to provide household items, food and hygiene essentials to 240 families after the stores in south Minneapolis were ruined in the unrest. She operated out of New Creation Baptist near Lake Nokomis. Rev. Joan's text reminded me that hope is tenacious and can be found in unexpected places. (I share by permission)

Good morning Pastor Mary,

I pray your doing well, I just wanted to share something with you.

My family and I had the great opportunity to help clean out the Target store on East Lake Street this past summer after the devastating destruction.

This was something we were happy, grateful, and honored to do.

Well last week my family and I went to Target on East Lake Street and it's totally different and beautiful.

As I walked through the store I was reminded of what it looked like prior compared to what it looks like now it is simply mind boggling.

I began to think about the fact that Target made a decision to stay in the community, to continue to serve and be a part of the healing process for the community.

This brought me to tears, with so much pain and uncertainty in the world. This company has stayed in the midst of a huge time where community has faced disappointment over and over again.

I'm so grateful, appreciative and honored to continue shopping and supporting Target.

Blessings to you, just wanted to share my thoughts.

Rev. Joan Austin

Friends, we live in a time where all is not right, confident that God's mysterious, transformative, loving power is even now at work. Hope shines like a bright star in the evening sky, illuminating our path.

What gives you hope these days? If you are part of our service on Facebook, please take a moment and comment. Hope grows as it's shared. So, drop us an email, give us a call, share your stories of hope and promise with a friend or family member. As the nights grow longer this season, let us be the bearers of God's hope.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.