



“Persistent Hope”
Scripture – Luke 21:25-36
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 29, 2015

Our television and computer screens flash the urgent message: Rush to the store today or order online immediately before that special gift you must purchase is sold out!

The focus of the church is very different. On the first Sunday of Advent, the gospel readings focus not on gift buying – not even on the birth of Jesus – but on the end of the world.

The culture announces that Santa is coming and wants you to have a shiny, red Mercedes. The church warns that the apocalypse is coming and people will faint from fear and foreboding. Is it any wonder why secularism has a greater lure than the Christian faith?

The message to “buy more stuff” is a great deal more appealing than the message to “be alert” because a day of reckoning is coming. Yet, many of us have tried consumerism and discovered that it does not satisfy our deep need for meaning. A new car, a new set of clothes, a new smart phone will supply a measure of pleasure, but will not quench our thirst for a life that matters.

And when the bottom drops out, what then? How much comfort and hope will a new possession provide when you are battling cancer, when your marriage is failing, when your child is hooked on drugs, or when a gnawing anxiety has taken up residence in your soul?

Can we uncover any good news in our apocalyptic passage? While I am not suggesting that the end of the world is at hand, today’s events are disturbing and this end-of-time text seems more than a mere relic of the ancient world. There are plenty of signs to indicate that humanity might be unraveling.

A series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris killed 130 people including concert goers and diners at outdoor cafés. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. (Luke 21:25-26)*

In May, a violent earthquake in Nepal killed over 9,000 people and injured more than 23,000. *People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.*

Russian bombers hit a Turkish border crossing in revenge for their jet that was downed a day earlier escalating tensions in East-West relations. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations.*

Protesters marched through the streets of Chicago after a video was released showing a white police officer shooting a 17 year-old black youth lying on the ground. *People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.*

Terrorists killed 12 presidential guards in Tunisia after an ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up on a crowded bus. *There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations.*

Our passage was written 2,000 years ago, but could be mistaken for lines lurking in today's news. Thirst for power and fear of the other produce a combustible mixture that detonates gruesome atrocities.

Why so much anger and violence? Where is our world headed? These questions get under our skin and spawn anxiety, if not heart-wrenching despair. Could we put them on hold until January? Why not focus instead on "Round yon Virgin, Mother and child, Holy Infant, so tender and mild"?

The Christian calendar prevents us from rushing too quickly to the stable in Bethlehem. Our readings for the first Sunday in Advent come not from the days preceding the *birth* of Jesus, but rather from a few days prior to his *death*. They served as words of warning to the first followers of Jesus because their world was about to collapse.

Also, they made perfect sense to our gospel writer when he penned them for his audience around the year 85. These early Christians had witnessed the ruthless power of the occupying Romans. Caesar's armies had recently destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, killed scores of citizens and left the Holy City in ruins. Add to that the persecution of Christians, and it is hardly any wonder that the early followers of Jesus feared they were on the verge of catastrophe. Their attempts to describe it strained the boundaries of human thought, so they employed hyperbolic language and mysterious figures of speech to capture their fear that the end was near.

But that was 2,000 years ago. Do these words apply today? Even if they fail to fit our contemporary picture of the world, we can certainly apply them existentially. The world may continue for centuries, but we surely will not. Our lives will come to an end.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus; why does the church launch the season of Advent talking about death? Because recognizing we are finite, can prompt us to turn to the One who is infinite. Knowing our time on earth is limited can be the first step to real living.

Eighteenth century writer Samuel Johnson said, "Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." The threat of death sharpens our focus on what we need to do while there is still time.

Seminary President, Michael Jenkins, reminds us that "threats to our existence can paralyze us in a state of perpetual anxiety (or) they can make us vicious toward one another." There is a third alternative. They can motivate us – as did the nightmares of Scrooge – to turn to God and to live as God wants us to live.

Christmas can be an escape from the real world of suffering. Advent reminds us that although we celebrate the coming of the light into the darkness, evil is a ferocious enemy that resists being tamed. Left to ourselves, we turn cynical, and evil wins the day. Yet, despite how cruel we can be to one another, God never stops working to transform the world. Thus, we live in hope.

During his 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela refused to surrender to despair. "In his autobiography, Mandela wrote: I have found that one can bear the unbearable if one can keep spirits strong even when the body is being tested. Strong convictions are the secret of surviving deprivation.

Your spirit can be full even when your stomach is empty. I always knew that some day I would once again feel the grass under my feet and walk in the sunshine as a free man...Part of being (a person of hope) is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward."¹

God urges us to keep our spirits strong, even when fear and violence threaten. We are to keep our eyes focused on Christ and to keep moving forward.

Advent is a time of yearning – both our yearning and God's yearning. We yearn for God to set the world right, God yearns for us to become partners in reconciling what is broken. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." A theologian from an earlier generation put it this way: "Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not."²

You may have seen the photo of the New York City police officer in Times Square. Officer Lawrence DePrimo is kneeling in front of a homeless man who had no shoes. The officer had just given him a pair of boots he bought with his own money. The officer did not solve the problem of homelessness with one pair of boots, but it made a difference. It made a difference in the homeless man's life and it made a difference in the police officer's life. Since going viral on the Internet, it has made a difference in the lives of others who were inspired to reach out to someone in their sphere of influence. It nudged the world slightly closer to God's vision of a world where all are cared for.

We conquer our despair by doing what we can, even if what we can do is small. You cannot solve the Syrian Civil War, but you can aid Syrian refugees through our mission funds. You cannot solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but through our *Peace Drums Project* you can help Jews, Christians and Muslims who live in Israel get to know each other as human beings, rather than simply as the enemy. You cannot solve the problem that 1 in 8 people in Delaware have experienced food insecurity in the past year, but you can donate food to a food pantry, or serve at Emmanuel Dining Room or Saturday morning breakfast.

Augustine said, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." Be awake this week to your opportunities to lift a burden, to show respect, to heal a wound.

Advent is not a season for wishing that God will take action and for passively waiting for things to get better. Advent is a call to be God's agents of light in a world engulfed by too much darkness. And Advent reminds us that no matter how bleak things appear, we never give up, because God never gives up on us.

NOTES

1. Susan Andrews, "A God's Eye View," November 30, 2003.
2. William Sloane Coffin

Prayers of the People ~ Thomas R. Stout

(This prayer is based on the 212 cards filled
in by worshippers on November 22, 2015)

God, you are the source of all goodness;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For ordinary, everyday people, and events, and things like: family, friends, health, safety, homes, and smiles;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For jobs and co-workers, for challenges and new work, for futures that spread out before us, and for resources that are more than enough;
With grateful heart we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For second chances and for restored health; for hospice centers and for life-care facilities; for volunteers, and staff, and choirs, and musicians;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For our planet, its creatures, flowers, and trees; for food in abundance; for sunrises and sunsets that amaze over and over again;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For parents and mentors, for their guidance and encouragement; for those who themselves look up and beyond, and who encourage us to do the same; for those who need help for themselves, or for another, and who seek it;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

For this place in which we worship, and for all who lead and join us in song, word, thought, reflection, action and deeds of forgiveness, justice, love and mercy;
With grateful hearts we pray: *We bless you, O God.*

And now we pray together as Jesus taught us: “*Our Father, ...*”