



"Clinging to Hope"
Scripture – Luke 21:25-36
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 28, 2021

Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martin in-the-Fields Church in London, writes about his friend who is struggling with a debilitating post-viral fatigue syndrome. "He's 55 years old and he's had the heart and soul torn out of his life the last 20 years, and there is no upward curve. Right now he's so weighed down he cannot even see an old friend for a half-hour chat. What can we say in the face of this long imprisonment? [For 20 years, they] have struggled together to put some meaning around his friend's experience, and what truth they've found has come through his friend's courage, his honesty, and his willingness to share hope and despair."¹

Wells tells about his friend's illness for two reasons. First, living during a global pandemic – 20 months and still counting – "feels like the whole world has post-viral fatigue syndrome."² And, second, because it may provide insights into where we find the illusive hope of Advent.

A few days after not being able to see his friend in person, Wells gave him a call. During the call, Wells said, "I wonder if this illness will ever end. Do you think you will be like this – often housebound and sometimes bedridden – for the rest of your life, maybe another 35 years? [Wells says that] "occasionally he has the courage to say those words and his friend has the grace to say, 'Yes, I often do wonder this.' His friend is glad to have someone in his life who is not constantly pointing him to miracle websites or telling him about a cousin or a friend at work who had something similar and experienced an amazing cure. His friend is relieved that someone in his life can call it what it is."³

Until you know suffering, hope is little more than attempting to put a lightweight spin on reasons to despair.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the gospel reading focuses not on the coming of the babe in Bethlehem, but rather on the so-called second coming of Christ. Our reading is an other-worldly vision of cosmic upheaval. "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. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

The early Christian community believed that something catastrophic was about to occur. Their attempts to describe it strained the boundaries of language and thought, and so they employed symbols and images and mysterious figures of speech.

I understand that there is a great distance between first century Palestine and 21st century North America. However, the words of this passage are not entirely bound by the time in which they were written. There is also within this passage a timeless message.

Those first century Christians believed that the world was unraveling and the end was approaching. Forty years after the death of Jesus, in the year 70, the Roman army laid waste to the temple in Jerusalem, killed hundreds of people and reduced the holy city to rubble.

The Gospel of Luke was written to a Christian community 10 to 20 years after Jerusalem was obliterated and things seemed to be devolving further. The Romans appeared to be more powerful than ever and they were wildly persecuting Christians. From the perspective of the followers of Jesus, the world seemed to be coming unglued and the future was grim.

Can you relate to that feeling of impending doom? Sometimes I feel as if we're teetering on the brink of disaster and I wonder what will finally do us in. Will it be a global pandemic created by a virus that keeps mutating until science runs out of tricks and no vaccine can vanquish it? Or will we heat up the planet just a bit more until melting ice caps and raging wildfires and violent storms spell the end? Or will we hit the tipping point over the stark divisions in politics, race, religion or the widening gulf between the ultra-rich and the poor?

These early Christians were encouraged to remain faithful despite the fact that some of them were being put to death for their belief in Christ. They were challenged to cling to hope even though their world was crumbling. This apocalyptic vision was a powerful message of hope that declared that evil and suffering would not prevail. God will have the last word.

It is not necessary for us to believe that someday Jesus will literally swoop down on the back of a cloud to set everything right. In mysterious images, this passage declares that despite how terrible life may be, God never gives up on us. Despite the way we neglect the poor, God never stops working to transform our hearts so that we become more generous. Despite the way we abuse God's natural creation, God never stops encouraging us to care for it. Despite the fact that we constantly threaten and kill each other, God never stops working to show us the more perfect way of peace. The first Sunday of Advent reminds us that no matter how bleak the future may appear, followers of Christ are people of hope.

Have you seen the oil painting by English artist George Frederic Watts entitled, "Hope?" I'll describe it for you, but later you can Google it.

The painting depicts a blind-folded woman, head downcast, sitting atop the earth holding a musical instrument. It is a lyre that has lost all of its strings, except one.

Watts painted it in the 1880s after Britain had experienced a long and difficult economic depression and shortly after his daughter's infant child had died. It is anything but cheery-eyed optimism that sees only the bright side of life. The woman in the painting knows suffering and the multiple reasons to despair. And yet, all is not lost. She clings to hope. There is no sun on the horizon. There is no soaring bird in the sky. Rather, her ear is as close as possible to the one remaining string and she is plucking it to see if she can still hear music.

Maybe you have been there. Maybe you are there today. Life is dark and you are clinging to a single string of hope.

Pondering the bleak situation of his friend with the debilitating illness, Wells asks: "If you suffer and there is no end in sight, how do you live in a way that demonstrates your faith that one day your suffering will end? [He answers]: "If life cannot be happy, make it beautiful. His friend's life is not happy, and it hasn't been for 20 years. But he has found ways to make it beautiful."

"Not long ago the friend sent Wells a couple of small paintings he had done of mountain views from walks the two had taken together [before the onset of the disease]. The paintings made Wells cry because he can only imagine how long it had taken his friend to paint them. He also cried because he can vividly recall what an energetic and inspiring mountain companion he had once been. And he cried because he doubts they will ever again stand on a mountain together and behold such views. However, those paintings [also stand as a clenched teeth declaration of faith] that this is not the end of the story and that God prepares for us good things that are beyond our comprehension."⁴ If life cannot be happy, find ways to make it beautiful.

Christians wear crosses not because we continually mourn the death of Jesus, but because even the worst the world can throw at us is not the end. God can transform death into life. We do not ignore the darkness in the world; we face it. We face it with the bold confidence that the light that shines in the darkness will never be extinguished.

A colleague (Jenny McDevitt) reminds us that the poet Emily Dickinson penned these words about hope. She wrote,

Hope is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul
it sings the tunes without the words
and never stops at all.

But when life is hell and there's no end in sight, hope is less like a songbird and more like what is described in this poem, written by Caitlin Selda:

Hope is not the thing with feathers
that comes home to roost
when you need it most.
Hope is an ugly thing,
with teeth and claws and
patchy fur that has seen some things.
It's what thrives in the discards
and survives in the ugliest parts of our world,
able to find a way to go on
when nothing else can even find a way in.
It's the gritty, nasty little carrier
of such diseases as
optimism, persistence,
perseverance and joy,
transmissible as it drags its tail
across your path and bites you.
Hope is not some delicate,
beautiful bird, Emily.
It's a lowly little sewer rat,

one that snorts pesticides
and still shows up on time
to work the next day
looking no worse for the wear.⁵

Hope is not a blind optimism that turns its head from the reality of pain and suffering. It is a gritty belief that beyond the present darkness there is light, and the final chapter of the story belongs to God.

NOTES

1. Sam Wells, "Coming, Ready or Not: The Character of Advent Hope," *Journal for Preachers*, p.9.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.10.
4. Ibid., p.12.
5. Jenny McDevitt, "There's Someone I'd Like You to Meet: Joseph of Arimathea," July 25, 2021.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of all galaxies, whose energy fuels the universe and whose love caresses each creature, we give thanks for this special season of the church. Having not yet lost the glow of our Thanksgiving celebration, we embark on Advent with a grateful heart, mindful of the multitude of our blessings all of which have their genesis in you.

In the coming weeks we will purchase gifts, bedeck our homes, nurture warm ties with others, reconnect with long-time friends, contribute generously to people in need, and delight in hope.

Loving God, we give you thanks for expressing your love for us through Jesus of Nazareth, who walked this earth long ago and during his earthly journey endured the hardships and savored the happiness that comes with human existence. He knew heartache and laughter, struggle and comfort, sorrow and joy. Through him, you painted a hope-filled future by teaching us to love our neighbor, to guard against greed, to do everything in our power to make the world more just, and to work tirelessly for the common good.

Mighty God, as Jesus came into the world long ago, we pray that he will break into our lives again and again, to shake us from our lethargy and to awaken us to your presence. Grant us visions of the rich life that awaits us if we live in harmony with your ways.

We pray that Christ will come into our minds to inspire creative solutions to the problems of our day, come into our hearts to generate an eager desire to reconcile broken relationships, and come into our souls to energize our resolve to follow his way, to pursue his truth and to dedicate our lives to what is beautiful and worthy.

Gracious God, during these days of Advent, help us to be attentive to opportunities to work in partnership with you to forge a new future where lies are buried by truth, fears overcome by courage, indifference is surpassed by compassion, and despair defeated by hope.

Now, hear us as we join our voices as one, praying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.