



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR C ARE:
JEREMIAH 33:14-16; PSALM 25:1-9; 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13; LUKE 21: 25-36

HOPE IN DARK TIMES

Luke 21:25-36 [Jesus said, "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. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."]

How do we, as people of faith, read the signs of the times?

In truth, people in every generation strive to understand their lives by reading the signs presented to them. The question is what signs do we see, and what do we miss?

Neuroscience tells us we are hard-wired to a negativity bias—that we preferentially pay

more attention to negative events than positive ones. We react more strongly to negative stimuli, and we remember traumatic experiences more vividly than positive ones. There is likely an evolutionary purpose for this—our ancestors learned to pay attention to predators preferentially. It was a matter of life or death.

So what are we to do with the onslaught of negativity that barrages us daily in these times? And what are we missing when we have our negativity blinders on?

As usual, the prophets of old have some wisdom to share in a time such as this. They have no interest in speaking half-truths, shellacked with optimistic platitudes which serve as little more than diversion. No, the prophets almost always herald a two-fold message: that things are bad, and may even get worse, largely because humans have fouled things up, but also that God is up to something in the midst of it all, and there is still reason to hope.

Prophets speak in twilight, what our Celtic forebears called “the time between the times” when it is neither day nor night, but mysteriously both. They regarded this twilight as sacred time, when the veil between what is and what is yet to be is pulled back to reveal something of import. A revelation, an apocalypse—that is what the Greek word actual means: a revealing that does not deny the terrible truth we already know, but to see it against the dawn of a newfound awareness.¹

This is the theme for our scriptures this morning as we begin Advent—a sacred time of “now and not yet,” a time of darkness yielding into a new dawn that invites us to consider how God is breaking into our lives even here, even now. Advent is a season to

“mark time” and read the signs anew, with intention.

Jeremiah speaks to our ancestors of faith who had been deported, exiled into a foreign land where they hung up their lutes and lyres, unable or unwilling to sing songs of joy in their desolation. He does not quibble with the laments, nor does he seek to downplay their suffering, but he does say that their restoration is forthcoming, even if they cannot see it just yet. There is still reason to hope.

And Jesus does not mince words when he cites the prophet Joel, saying, “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...”

But he doesn’t stop there. He says pay attention, because when these signs of the times arrive, then your redemption is near. Stand up, raise your heads, get ready, because God is up to something, and there is reason to hope even here, even now.

If Jesus had stopped with just the negative news, he might have made the front page of the Galilean Times, for one or two news cycles; but if he stopped there, I should think we would not be here today, in this house of worship dedicated to sharing his good news with anyone who chooses to listen. Stand up,

¹ Some of the thematic content related to time and twilight is inspired by an essay by Leonard Beechy in [The Christian Century](#), Nov. 17, 2009, accessed Nov. 29, 2024.

get ready, for God is coming to the world to redeem it.

Friends, this is not some sleek optimism or naïve pretense or thinly cloaked “power of positive thinking.”

Jurgen Moltmann published his seminal book 60 years ago, *Theology of Hope*, in which he draws the distinction between optimism and hope. I digress here to draw that distinction.²

Optimism is based on cause and effect thinking. We extrapolate about the future on the basis of the experience with the past and present, and we make assumptions that the future anticipated is the result of what has already been observed. Cause and effect. Since this happened, that is likely to happen.

If my three-year-old granddaughter seems precocious in some developmental phase, I am optimistic that this portends her doing well in school, and excelling in her future profession, and so forth. Optimism plays an important role for us, but it is not the same as hope.

Hope is not based on cause and effect thinking that conjures the possibilities which might unfold from the current situation, as we see it. It is not dependent on making the correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is predicated on the faithfulness of God who has promised, time and again, to show up.

Optimism is constrained by the cause-and-effect potentialities that unfold from what has

been and is now; hope is unconstrained because it originates and finds its meaning in God for whom all things are possible.

Hope shows up even in the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed, it is often there that we see the signs of God’s mercy and justice and love. Hope is the virtue we are being invited to embrace with intention, in this twilight time, and read the signs of God’s advent into our world as light dispelling darkness.

So how do we learn to read the signs of our times, as people of faith? Well, each of us must decide what works best to hone our vision, but I would offer a few suggestions here.

First, show up in community. The church exists to remind us that we live in the time between the times, between what is dying and what is being born, between the now and not yet of twilight.

Secondly, find your daily rhythms of prayer that help you orient to this God who yearns to be with us, here and now. This community offers several ways to do this, but perhaps even just choosing to read one psalm per day between now and Christmas, and see how the words speak unvarnished truth of life’s ambiguities which evoke lament and hope, even for us today.

Third, claim your place in some ministry that makes a difference in people’s lives. There

² This thread is drawn from an essay by Miroslav Volf in [The Christian Century](#), Dec. 28, 2004, accessed Nov. 29, 2024.

are some 80 ministries here at Saint Mark's, from ushering to preparing meals for those who are hungry to caring for creation. There are countless more opportunities out there. But whatever you do, see it as an opportunity to point, not to yourself, but to the hopeful act that such service is, that this world and the people in it are worthy of our care and concern, because it is all regarded by God as worthy.

And lastly, in this season of Advent, find some way to seriously fast from internet-

based news and social media. The brain's amygdala cannot process this much negativity (and misinformation) with any measure of immunity against anxiety and despair.

Use the time instead to stand up, raise your head, and see the signs of hope because this is sacred time, friends, when the veil between what is and what is yet to be is pulled back to reveal God's promise.

Will we, as people of faith, and see it for what it is?



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