

Sermon 1 Advent Year A  
December 2, 2007  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

## To Live in Hope

*In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!*  
Isaiah 2:1-5

*Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*  
Matthew 24:37-44

My topic for this morning is living a hopeful life, how to be a person of hope in the midst of everything that you and I can't help but worry about. To begin, somewhat paradoxically, I invite you to consciously invoke the worries that you hold and perhaps try not to think about as you live your life.

Worries take many forms and we worry about all sorts of things, some rather silly and in retrospect, unnecessary. Beneath our superficial worries lie deeper ones that sometimes keep us up at night or engaged in frenetic activity of avoidance. And then there's the steady drumbeat of worry about problems in our world of biblical proportion that seem to be increasing in intensity and legitimacy.

What do you worry about? What would come for you, as Jesus said, "like a thief in the night" and forever change your world?

It seems odd to begin a sermon about hope by invoking worry. Yet our worries are never far from us, no matter how hard we try to push them down or pretend they aren't there. Giving our worries real attention now and then, bringing them to the surface, talking them over with friends or trusted counsel, and offering them in prayer to God, can have the effect of disarming some of their power. A person beset with worries once asked a wise Catholic priest for help, and this is what he said: "Set a time each day when you are at your strongest. Sit in a comfortable chair and announce to the demons you keep at bay, 'all right, come on out.' Let them have their say, engage them for awhile, and then tell them when their time is up. If they press for more, tell them that you will invite them back tomorrow." Such a practice may not be helpful for everyone, but in times of deep worry in my life, I have often found it helpful to face my fears directly and establish some boundary around how much space they can have. It's one small way of being prepared in the way that Jesus talks about, of keeping watch, building resilience and adaptability of response to all that worries us.

The way that young children deal with fear can be instructive to those of us who are a bit older. Fears in young children typically dwell close to the surface, sometimes

taking the form of fantastic dreams, nightmares that would scare the socks off of anyone. In response to such dreams, children typically scream for the nearest person, tell of their dreams until their power is gone, seek comfort, and then go back to sleep.

Asleep or awake, children fear real things. The children on our block grew up knowing that parents can die, because of one set of boys whose father died when they were infants. All the children at my son's preschool attended the funeral of one of their classmates. Not one of them cried that day, but months later, my son announced as he set down his lunchbox after school, "Mom, I don't want to die until I'm 500, and I don't want you to die until then either." At first I said something foolish like, "Well I don't think you or I will die anytime soon." He pushed back, "But what if we do?" And I had to speak directly to his fear and mine: "If I die first," I told him, "there will always be someone to care for you. If you die, remember that Ben will be waiting for you and I'll be there soon. And no matter what happens God loves you and will be there with you." To my absolute astonishment, he was said, "Okay." That's the gift of facing our fears, as all those who work in emergency preparedness will tell us: by facing the worst that could happen and taking steps in advance to prepare for it, we breathe easier, knowing that we will not be caught unawares. "Be prepared," Jesus said, "for you do not when the day of the Lord will come.

But there is another side to the unexpected. Sometimes what comes as a thief in the night is *joy* and the fulfillment of a long-desired hope. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis entitled one of his books, *Surprised by Joy*, and he of all people surely was. You may recall that it was relatively late in his well-established bachelor life that Lewis fell deeply and unexpectedly in love.

So I invite you now to bring to mind the hopes you have, all that you long for. Hope also resides on many levels, from the trivial to the profound. We hope that we accomplish our work, whatever it is, reasonably well and on time, be it a meal or a project. I always hope that the airplanes I travel in will stay in the air. Like you, I hope for happiness and health for those I love, for peace and goodness to prevail. Linger here on the realm of hope, look to your future and try to envision all that you would like to have happen in the next week, month, or year. What do you want most in the world? What could possibly come to you like a thief in the night and surprise you with joy?

Something shifts inside when we bring our hopes to the surface, naming them so they are not drowned out by worries or the work of simply getting from one day to the next. It's good to know what we hope for; it matters that we honor the part of us rooted in all the good that could be. And unlike worry, which can lose some of its power when held to the light, hope becomes more powerful and urgent as we make room for it.

For that reason we may resist naming hope. We are more vulnerable in hope than in the dread of worry. I heard a news commentator say in response to the latest peace efforts in the Middle East, "Well, with the Middle East, it's always safe to be pessimistic." Isn't that true with all of life? It's always safe to be pessimistic. It takes absolutely no energy—not one ounce of creativity, imagination, or risk—to be negative. It takes far more effort to be hopeful. Hope is risky, and once we name hope, we are then accountable to it. With hope as our guide, surely some things in us would need to change. Surely we have some part in bringing hope to life. And what happens if hope is never realized? Is it better never to have hoped at all, than to risk hope and fail?

*In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains...all the nations shall stream to it...for out of Zion shall go forth instruction...they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Isaiah 2:1-5*

Thousands of years ago a poet had a dream for peace. There was no more evidence of peace or reason to hope for it in Isaiah's day than there is now. Yet the dream was given and it has never died, but is passed on from generation to generation. It may seem like a groundless hope, hardly worth striving for as the machines of war keep rolling on. Yet the dream comes from somewhere and it never goes away, even when its fulfillment seems hopelessly far off. And the people we recognize as “peacemakers”—whom Jesus said were especially blessed—are those who do not waver in their hope for peace as they work for its imperfect fulfillment in a given conflict, be it between individuals or nations.

Perhaps our noblest hopes can never be fulfilled in our lifetime. Yet the naming of hope makes us who we are, and our commitment to hope can determine the course of our lives.

We've come full circle in the Christian calendar, beginning once again the cycle of seasons. Advent is a season of preparation and the honoring of a profound spiritual memory. Advent also points to the future with words of warning and hope.

The warning we know already: that in the days to come, we will experience some of what we fear and dread. It is good to know that in advance and in some way to prepare, to keep our eyes open and our spiritual resources ready. Advent's hope is this: that in the days to come, we will be surprised by joy, peace and love. It's good to know that, too, and to consider the choices before us. How can we put ourselves in the place of most potential and do our part to realize the best of possibilities?

One final thing to remember about hope: God's way is always to begin small, to plant seeds of life in unexpected places. Those seeds have already been planted, the beginning of possibilities that we do not as yet see. Like an embryo, this new life will grow slowly and come into its own. Our task now is to trust its presence, to be caretakers of the hope we are given, and to live as best we can as if what we hope for most in the world were already well on the way to its fulfillment.

At the back of the church and in the entranceway to the parish hall, you will find a sheet of paper with a suggested spiritual practice for this week. It's simple and concrete:

*Make a list of the things you are currently hoping for. The list may include anything related to your personal life and relationships, your work, what you hope for others and for our world. When you have finished the list, look over it. Circle one item and say a brief prayer for God's help in bringing it about. If praying for what you hope for feels uncomfortable, pray simply for clarity and guidance. Then pay attention during these days to what comes to you in response to your prayers of hope.<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Found in *Advent and Christmas: Wisdom from G.K. Chesterton*. Compiled by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis and Friends. (Liguori, MO:Liguori Press, 2007) p. 3.