

**Message Delivered at Christ Church  
November 28<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009; Advent I**

**TEXT: Luke 21:25-36**

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Happy New Year, everybody! Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and in the Christian calendar the first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the new church year. First Sunday of Advent always happens four Sundays before Christmas, and it is an observance, quite frankly, that separates us out from what's happening in the world around us: Black Friday, and Christmas lights and carols, and specials on TV. But in worship, you'll hear some different kinds of words. While the rest of the world tumbles towards Christmas, what we do is slow down a little bit, and wait, and give hope space to be rekindled one more time. It's what we always do this time of year...get a little shot of hope. Fresh starts always make new things possible. That's what we believe.

Now hope is an ancient thing—at least as ancient as the scriptures. So can I do a little teaching on ancient things?

There's a branch of Christian theology called eschatology. It comes from the Greek word "eschatos," which means "end, or final, or last" and the suffix "l-o-g-y," which for us means "study of." The concept of a "final time"—the Eschaton--is an element of Christian belief, and it's with eschatology that we start Advent.

We don't know exactly when eschatological thought entered the Hebrew understanding of God and the world, but its first written articulation comes from the hand of a prophet named Amos who prophesied about 800 years before Christ. Amos looked around, and saw the injustice of his society, and declared in the presence of the King of Judah that this was not what God intended. He declared God's judgment against those who remain satisfied in their comfort while the poor suffer such persecution and oppression. And in his prophecy, he began to speak of what he called "The Day of the Lord," a time when God's self would be revealed and enter into history, take care of business, and rectify this wickedness.

The Day of the Lord continued as part of the prophetic tradition, though later—when Israel, herself, entered into her own time of suffering and persecution at the hands of the Babylonians, and then the Persians, and then the Greeks—the end times as a time of judgment was complimented by the notion that it would be a time of salvation. Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all spoke of the end of things being a time when God would restore Israel for the sake of the whole world, and all would be well...promises would be fulfilled; the blind would see; the lame would walk; the hungry would be fed; the dead would be raised; the lion would lie down with the lamb; the swords would be beaten into plowshares, and we would study war no more. Amos spoke of the Day of the Lord as judgment against the prideful and arrogant. When Israel, herself, became oppressed, it was revealed that the Day of the Lord would be a time of rightness, and something worth hoping for.

Hope.

Hope is the expectation and anticipation that tomorrow can be better than today; that what ails us will not last forever; that today's difficulties are momentary, not permanent. About 500 years ago, the concept of hope morphed into the concept of progress. Progress, however, is more mundane than hope. Progress is rooted solely in human ability and in the living of this life.

But with hope there is some handing over, we lift up our eyes to the hills, as the psalmist says, from whence our salvation cometh, yearning for and expecting something that's beyond what is humanly possible.

And it is with the Jewish people that hope began.

You see, the cultures that surrounded the Jews—the Egyptians, and then the Mesopotamians, and then the Greeks and the Romans—did not know hope. For them, history was static. Today was the same as yesterday, and yesterday would be the same as today. The cast of characters might change, but nothing would ever be any different. There would always be oppression and injustice; there would always be violence and war; there would always be poverty and there would always be death. “I wasn't; I was; I'm not” is what the tombstone said of one Roman citizen; and if anything sums up the cynical and hopeless understanding of the classical world, it's those words.

But what the Jews—a people that for centuries had been denied their freedom; who had lived under burdens difficult for us to comprehend—what the Jews believed is this: There will come a day—a final day--when the Lord will again enter into history, and all will be made right. And for that day, we wait...and we hope.

This anticipation and watchfulness, of course, did not stop with the Jews. It continued among the Christians. Read the letters of Paul, and they are filled with expectation of the end times and the consummation of history in the return of the Lord. And all of Revelation—that bewildering final book of the Bible—is a vision of the Eschaton. John the Revelator, who writes the Book of Revelation, is in political exile on an island called Patmos writing to other believers who look around at the world and see nothing changing. So on a massive canvas, he paints a picture of how the Lord will step into history, and save the faithful, and right all the injustices and heal all the wounds. “It's true,” the Revelator preaches, “we cannot save ourselves. But here's a word of how God can, and God will. So until then, what we'll do is remain steadfast, and hope, and wait...”

So it is that when Jesus speaks these words he speaks a language his people understand. He says these words in Jerusalem, before the crucifixion, while standing outside the Temple. The Temple will fall down, he says to his followers, and there will be violence and wars, and the powers of this world will persecute you. It won't be easy. When it comes, be ready, for it will be a time for you to give witness. There will be signs in the heavens, and signs on this earth, and they all point towards the coming Kingdom of God. So be alert; stay vigilant; and pray; and stand up, for your redemption draweth nigh. No one knows when all this will happen, he says elsewhere, so until it does...stay strong, and wait, and hope.

And so, they did. And so we do. And on this weekend after Thanksgiving we read these not very Christmassy words offered to a beleaguered and bedraggled people...these peculiar, almost incomprehensible, words of yearning, and expectation, and hope that proclaim that the time is near.

They don't fit what's going on all around us. Mostly, we look at our toes this time of year; we hustle and bustle. Which isn't such a bad thing. There's lots of fun stuff to do around this time of year. And mostly, these words about end times don't fit our mindset. Jesus says here that this generation shall not pass away until all things have taken place. But that generation passed away, and all this did not take place, so why, therefore, should we expect that it will take place in our generation? There are all sorts of reasons to put these words off to the side...

But still, we read them...maybe, because we're not as different as we think we are. You know, I keep looking for people who don't need hope, but don't find very many of them. I don't

find too many people who are happy being hopeless. Occasionally, I meet people who have given up on hope, who have resigned themselves to a life without new possibilities...who look around, become convinced that this is all there is, and lose themselves not so much in dissipation and drunkenness, as Jesus says, but more in palliative and diversionary trivialities and pleasures. Still, my experience is that these are people who need hope, but just don't have it; that if someone would give it to them, they'd take it. Because again, everybody pretty much needs it. If we approach the day with any vigor at all, it's hope that makes it so.

Well, hope is the business we're in as disciples of the Lord. We're the ones charged with bring hope to a hopeless world. It's what Jesus gives us—even in these words today--and so it's what we give to others. The world still needs it, everybody. And as I mentioned in the announcements, with the loss of George Preston—who not all of us knew, but some of us did—we're grieving again so that we still need it, too...a steady dose, day-by-day.

As sophisticated and advanced as we are, hope is still vital for life to be worth living. It pulls us forward; it inspires us to creative thinking and action; and it makes even the smallest act of love worth doing. And because we need it is why in the midst of all the stuff we do at this time of year, every once in a while...like today...we'll stop, and pause, and be still, and remember that the One in whom we hope, whose promises are most powerfully real, is coming, and has come; that it's the arrival of hope for which we are preparing. The Kingdom is here, and it's coming. The irony for those persons to whom Jesus said these words is that the One they were waiting for was standing right in front of them, and that already, their redemption was as close as a secret.

So probably there's a more profound thing to say on this weekend, but simplicity—like expectation, and waiting, and hope—is an Advent virtue, so I'll keep it as simple as I can. These complicated words from Jesus speak to a simple truth we celebrate, especially at this time of year: That despite the dirty stuff that comes into our world from time to time—war, and disease, and famine, and death, and grief, and fear, and hatred, and all those nasty things that darken our countenance and fill the front pages—despite it all; despite how it appears to be; the Lord is still at work...hidden, possibly; not as obvious as we would like it to be...but still, at work, and still coming, and still bringing hope...for you, and for me, and for the entire world. It's all right, y'all. All will be well. That's the gift of hope at work.

You know, in these words today Jesus speaks of the heavens giving a sign..."there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars." Let me tell you something funny...those who listened to him probably thought in terms of something that would happen...a future event. What we know, is that he was simply stating something that already had. And here's that sign (*here, Paul pointed to the Christmas star used in the pageant*)...and the wise men, and the shepherds, and the angels would move towards it, filled with all hope that the Day of the Lord had finally arrived. It did. And because it did, at the start of this new year—and always—we hope.

I don't know what you want to have happen this Christmas. But may it be that this Advent, the hope of the world finds a home in you.