

“The Hope that Heals Us” – © 2018 Ellen Clark Clémot

December 2, 2018, First Sunday in Advent – Year C - Luke 21:25-36

A Sermon by Rev. Ellen Clark Clémot, Interim Pastor/Head of Staff, Larchmont Avenue Church

Theme: Advent brings us hope – once we give up everything to God.

Lord God of Hope and Healing, Prince of Patience and Peace: Come to us once more in the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Help us remember to be ready for you by practicing your gracious welcome. Let the Advent season be a time of hospitality so that we might receive you, and all who need you, with open arms and heads held high.

And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There are times, despite terrible odds, when we refuse to give up hope. In fact, I would argue that the gift of hope is what makes the Christian faith so compelling. As Christians, we have someone and something in which to put our faith, entrust our lives, and arrange our values to make meaning of our every day. That *someone* at the center of our hope is our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, and that *something* that emboldens us forward is God’s promise of a better tomorrow - no matter what today might bring.

As we begin the liturgical season of Advent today, the gift of hope is lifted up as a guiding light, not merely for the days ahead, but as the hallmark of our entire lives. We live in the hope that anything is possible with God, all the while acknowledging that whatever unfolds will be given in God’s time, and in God’s way. This morning we will light the first candle on our Advent wreath – the candle of hope. From it, peace, joy and love will follow like summer follows spring, like new leaves on the trees portent new life.

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I witnessed the power of hope this week as I spoke to a man named Roby whom I know from another church. It was a remarkable thing to be able to call him at all, at his home, as easily as I might contact any of you. The circumstances were incredible because for the last 11 months Roby had been held in custody by ICE, the federal immigration and customs enforcement agency, in a Newark Detention Center – but never had a trial. Although Roby had working papers and a driver’s license, even though he paid his taxes and tithed to his church for nearly twenty years, irregularities in his immigrant status, and the fact that he reported to ICE every six months, made him an easy arrest to make.

Roby was singled out and rounded up. He was taken into custody by ICE last January after dropping off his daughter at school. His arrest caused an uproar in church, where he’d worshipped and served as a deacon. It upset the people in town who knew his two US-born daughters from school band, girl scouts, and their place on the honor roll. And it transformed a comfortable commuter town into a

community of activists. It's not to say that every immigration case should be set aside and pardoned, but Roby's situation was one of good faith. He is a person of excellent moral character. And he is, above all else, a hopeful, faithful Christian.

Roby was taken to a Detention Center on the edge of Newark, near the loading docks for container ships, and the place where the Statue of Liberty stands with her back to you. The prison has a moat around it and barbed wire. It is meant to be a jail for criminals. Inmates there convicted of violent crimes wear red wrist bracelets. Yet, on the third floor, the federal government has rented out a space for immigration detainees. They have not been convicted of any crimes. They are held there without bail hearings. And they all have been issued white wrist bracelets to wear instead of red – which is telling.

I had been visiting Roby in prison every two weeks for months and months. I especially noticed the white bracelets, the grey prison uniforms, and the lack of windows. I would meet with Roby in a small consulting room with a table and chairs, meant for lawyer and clergy conferences, near the men's dorms with beds for up to 40 men.

Roby and I, and another detainee, would meet and pray together. I would read from scripture. We shared communion. Month after month. There were days when I wondered if he'd ever make it home again. He seemed so alone in his windowless world. So few visitors. No movement from the courts. It seemed suffocating. Yet Roby always kept the faith. He told me he read his Bible every day. By mid-summer he'd read it front to back twice. The Gospels multiple times. He never gave up hope.

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Advent is a liminal time – a not-yet/already time of Jesus with us, Jesus behind us, and Jesus before us. But it is not a forever time, nor is it a prison sentence. Advent is hope-filled because Jesus made a promise – the one we heard in scripture today. He promised to return for us – and set us free.

We remember this promise in Advent and we are reminded to prepare ourselves. We prepare for Jesus. We prepare by practicing our faith: loving our neighbor, welcoming the stranger, sharing what we can spare, giving all we can give. Advent calls us to be Advent people: ever-mindful of what Christ has taught us to strive for as disciples, while all the while preparing for Christ's coming – be it by revelation (God revealed to us) at the end of time, or by incarnation (remembering God, born human, among us) in the historical past.

In this thin space between being and still becoming, we too are evolving. We mature in our faith at different tempos. We have seasons of participation and reflection. We have periods of turmoil and despair. But all the while, we are

called to be alert and awake to Christ's coming among us at any time – through the power of the Spirit, in unexpected moments, like a thief in the night.

How else can we be an Advent church, an Advent people in this liminal time? How do we live vigilantly, watching, waiting, and ready for the coming of the one who is coming? How do we stand and raise up our heads amidst the politics of deception played out in our nation – when asylum seekers are separated from their own children, when journalists are slammed, and even slaughtered, for speaking truth to power, when people go hungry and homeless and coatless and afraid in our own communities?

Perhaps we live into Advent through hope in Jesus. We become Advent people by making this place - and our very hearts - a dwelling for honesty and hospitality, for security and safety, by providing a haven for the weary, a welcome for the outcast, by becoming an emblem of God's love.

Christ's past, present and future for us, and among us, brings us hope, and a sense of freedom from whatever ails us – whatever weighs us down: be it the worries of our days, the anxieties of our nation, or the environmental decay of our world. Hope will heal us of the painful things that happened to us and the wrongs we brought on ourselves.

In Advent we can experience the relief that hopefulness brings. The hope that heals us from so many self-inflicted wounds. The hope that lifts us out of sadness. The hope that helps us carry on. Jesus frees us from our frailty, releases us from the terrors of the world, and rescues us from our darkest days.

Luke's Jesus offers us a promise and reassurance: "I haven't forgotten you. Don't despair over the shortcomings of this world as you know it, for a better and brighter tomorrow awaits."

Jesus speaks only hours from his final Passover, the Last Supper, and the plot to crucify him. It's at this hopeless moment that Jesus offers his most powerful message of hope.

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So, if you came to church today to celebrate Christmas, you will be disappointed.

Although I tried for a few Christmas carols in this service, I couldn't even convince our music director, Douglas Kostner, to let us sing "O Come, O Come Emanuel." I tried.

"We're not there yet," he told me. "It's too soon."

And he's right, of course. We gather this morning not to celebrate, but to prepare: not for a birth but for an explosion, a tearing open of heaven and earth to reveal a more perfect Kingdom with a forever life in Christ. We hold this breath-taking good news in our hands with great care – and with hopefulness, in the

knowledge that even as we wait, God is already at work in us, and through us, to transform our world, our church, and our community, from something we've distorted, to something new and set right, still unfolding – our very lives transformed in Christ.

Perhaps this transformative promise of renewal is why we start our new church year with an apocalyptic scripture passage. Our first day of Advent lectionary study is not about Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem to have a baby, but rather it serves as a sentinel, declaring Jesus Christ incarnate: fully human, fully divine, urging his disciples to stay alert. To keep awake, for change is afoot.

It's an appropriate message for all of us here at LAC. This particular Advent is a time of preparation for the renewal of our church. A new vision for the way we understand God's call on our lives together in community. We begin now, this very month, with an election of new officers, with their fresh eyes and thoughts about our shared ministry. And it's a new beginning for the rest of us too. We will have conversations together – all of us, with a keen sense of hopefulness for our church's future.

Each one of you will have a chance to meet and pray and talk together with small groups as we press down on questions of direction, mission, and ministry. Should we do more outreach? More in-reach? More education? More prayer?

Whatever we do, let's not forget Jesus. Jesus is our center – the head of the church - and its heart.

Whatever we decide to do as a church, we need to acknowledge that nothing of lasting significance will result unless we give up our efforts to “control” and over-program our lives to death. Instead, this is a time to let go and give all to God. Jesus calls us to give up our drive to excel and succeed, and to opine on every little thing, and focus instead on the one most important thing: the life-giving love of God.

We strivers, we hard-workers, we over-achievers, you and me included, we are called to put down our oars, to stop straining against the tide, and hoist up the sail instead. God's Spirit will power this church forward with wind in our sails and push us to new places we could never reach on our own. But we must allow God's Holy Spirit to enter in. “Let go and let God,” the 12-step groups will tell us. Today, the first Sunday in Advent, is a good time to hear that message afresh.

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Consider, then, the Advent apocalypse as not so much a warning as a promise. Good News for all of us: Jesus was and is and will come again. Be alert. Be awake. Don't give up hope. Jesus might already be among us today.

He might have been nearby in November.

The week before Thanksgiving – on Veteran’s Day, I received a call from a Big Law litigation firm in New York City. They were pursuing a pro bono class action claim on behalf of all the ICE-arrested, asylum-seeking detainees I’d seen languishing in detention for months without a hearing. The lawyers asked me for an affidavit in support of the good moral character of the men I knew and prayed and prayed for all those weeks in prison. The law firm sought to obtain a hearing for the asylum-seeking detainees, including for my friend Roby, and to ask for their release on bond.

As you know now, the petition was successful. A hearing date was set for the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The judge showed mercy and even quoted from my affidavit in giving his favorable ruling at the hearing. Roby was released along with two other Christian detainees on \$5000 bail just in time to join their families with great gratitude on Thanksgiving Day. They swapped their wrist bracelets for ankle monitors. But they were released. After 11 months of waiting, they never gave up hope.

Now Roby speaks about the future with wild optimism. And why not? Anything is possible with God. The ACLU has taken his case to renew his asylum claim. They are already helping him secure a new driver’s license and a working permit, to replace the ones that had expired while he was in detention. His daughters are buoyant, excelling in school and quietly readjusting to life with Dad back at home. Roby’s wife was out getting groceries when I called, to prepare the traditional hot-spiced meals of their native country. The family was back together again.

Roby and I talked about meeting up in the days ahead – to give thanks to God, and to remember.

Hope is the fruit of the Spirit. When we give all our worries to Jesus, Jesus gives us hope.

We cannot control the world around us, but we can be prepared, as Christ’s disciples, to recognize the grace we’ve already been given as it comes back to us once again.

Amen.