

“Viewing Life Through Hope” 11-29-15

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36

Each summer Betty and I carve out some time to hike in Glacier National Park. The first thing that we are made aware of is to appropriately beware the bears and grizzlies. Hike in groups, make noises on the trail, carry mace, and so on. The warnings instill a measure of fear that, if allowed, may overcome the original joy of going on a beautiful hike. Of course, it doesn't help if there is news that a grizzly bear just roughed up or killed a hiker.

The warnings are there to insure safety. Statistically, there is a remote chance that one would encounter a bear in a dangerous situation. Similar warnings are made about driving during the holidays. Often those warnings are sprinkled with the number of deaths in the previous years. Do we stop driving or allow our fear of an accident to keep us from visiting friends or family?

Our Luke text features Jesus teaching about signs surrounding the end of time. There will be warnings, or signs in the sun, moon, stars, and the earth will be in distress due to the disruption of nature's cycles. Jesus tells them that when they see these things “your redemption is drawing near”. After he shares the parable of the fig tree he tells them “to be on guard”.

This whole section emerges within a conversation Jesus is having with the disciples. After Jesus tells them that the Temple will be destroyed, they ask him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” (Luke 21:7). He proceeds to draw a picture of apocalyptic events, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the nature of events prior to the coming of the Son of Man.

The temptation lies in being drawn in to the horror of it all. The other extreme is to ignore the signs and warning altogether. I can be consumed on my beautiful hike that the grizzly bears are going to get me or ignore the appropriate warnings that are there to assure that my hike is safe and enjoyable.

So how does Jesus respond to the disciples who by now are probably caught up in the horror of it all? He says, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”. In other words, “Relax, this is a good thing, a hopeful thing”. History is a God guided story with a coherent beginning, middle, and end, not an endless cycle of chaos.

We have those days that feel like disasters. We walk out of the office depressed or consumed with anger at someone or something. Emotions are at the boiling point. From our perspective we have tried so hard to be successful, to please a boss or spouse, to be respected, but everything points south. We get in the car and listen to the news of a terrorist attack in Paris or Mali or someplace else. Next is the news of a shooting several blocks from home. Hope is just a word.

Jesus tells the story of the fig tree. It is Jesus way of calming them down. This is pastoral counsel. As the tree blossoms and bears fruit it is summer. There is hope because these are signs that the “kingdom of God is near”.

Yes, the times we live in are uncertain. So were those of Jesus' day. We need hope. Newspapers carry accounts daily of war, bloodshed and crisis. It is not just in Iraq, Syria, the West Bank of Israel. We live in a global economy. We are all affected. The tentacles of destruction are capable of reaching to any point on earth. A climate of fear and foreboding seems to be engulfing our political discourse and our personal feelings about life.

What does Jesus say? "Raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near". The Advent of the kingdom of God is at hand. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away".

There is a certainty about life that exists but it is not found within the confines of this temporal world. Jesus enters our world to lift our hope beyond it. He is calling us this Advent to nurture faith, hope, and expectation. When we experience and witness signs of crisis in our lives and world, Jesus reminds us that God is not far away. Remember the fig tree. The kingdom of God is near. This temporal world and all of its sorrows, losses, hurts, violence and hate will pass away. But God's word will not.

For those who followed the second Lord of the Rings movie, you remember Sam. Sam and Frodo are caught in dire circumstances. Frodo is losing hope, burdened by his calling. Sam says to his fellow hobbit, Frodo, "There are things that people hold onto to keep them going". Frodo responds by asking, "What are we holding onto?" Sam replies, "That there is some good in this world, and that's worth fighting for" (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec, 2003).

It is Jesus who gives that something that is worth fighting for. We bring hope to our immigrant families through tangible support and assistance. We offer ESL to aid in learning the language and culture of a new home. We partner, linking arms with our church family at Luyano in Cuba. Racial reconciliation conversations with our African American neighbors aids in understanding each other. We partner with community agencies to support the human needs of our community. This Advent reminds us that we live in the tension between the first coming of Jesus as a man and the promise of his return at the end of time to bring the full reign of the kingdom of God. But we follow Jesus in bearing witness to the kingdom among us in the present.

In the meantime we stay focused on what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and the worries of this life...Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that take place, and to stand before the Son of Man". No matter what is happening in the world around us those words keep us alert so that we can make the most of our time on this earth.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon has this to say: "Why do you worry? What possible use does your worrying serve? You are aboard such a large ship that you would be unable to steer even if your Captain placed you at the helm. You would not even be able to adjust the sails, yet you worry as if you were the captain or the helmsman of the vessel. Be quiet, dear soul---God is the Master!"

A prominent theologian during my seminary days was Jurgen Moltmann. His theology centered around hope. A significant book of the time was entitled "A Theology of Hope". Why was this so important to him?

A German during the Second World War, he was drafted into the German army at eighteen years of age. Assigned to anti-aircraft batteries in Hamburg, he witnessed his compatriots incinerated in the fire bombings. He was haunted by the question, "Why did I survive?"

He was captured by the British. Somehow an American Army Chaplain issued him a New Testament and Psalms signed by President Roosevelt. Moltmann read the Psalmist's words, "If I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there".

He became convinced that God was present even behind barbed wire. Later he was exposed to kind people while in a YMCA camp in England. Some Christians there accepted him, taught him the scriptures, and gave him love even as he struggled with his feelings about the Nazi's atrocities.

When out of prison he began to develop a theology of hope, becoming a great German theologian. He stressed that we exist in a state of contradiction between the cross and the resurrection, between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. Surrounded by decay, he noted that we nonetheless hope for restoration. This hope is built on the reality of Christ's resurrection and the promise that it portends. "Raise your heads, your redemption is drawing near...Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away".

Moltmann writes, "A person without future faith may assume from the suffering on this planet that God is neither all-good nor all-powerful. Future faith allows me to believe that God is not satisfied with this world either, and intends to make all things new....God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.116).

A British poster created at the start of World War II, designed to raise the morale among the British people in the face of an apocalyptic invasion by the Nazis, posted strategically, read, "Keep Calm and Carry On". We live our lives with a deep abiding trust that the Lord who created the Universe is in control. In the face of what might appear apocalyptic events Jesus says, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near". Keep calm and carry on.

In Psalm 25 David expresses trust in God in the face of personal danger and opposition. He stresses that he takes refuge in God who delivers from troubles. Through it all he acknowledges that it is the person who exercises the humility of trust in God that finds his or her way through the challenges of life. "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and decrees".

Jesus would not have us despair or be drawn into the horror of life's worst moments. There will be another day. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning", David writes (Psalm 30:5). Always there is hope because "the kingdom of God is near", especially in the darkness of life.

Hope is recognizing that God is ever present. We don't need to fear. We are positioned by our Lord to rise above our anxieties and worries. We can view and live our lives through hope.

"On this side of the resurrection we can affirm in Christ the historical reality of Arundati Roy's now-famous poetry: 'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her

breathing” (Homiletics, 12-02-12, Jarrod McKenna, cited in Christian Piatt, ‘Banned Questions about the Bible (Chalice Press, 2011), 20.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.....Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”. On a quiet day I can hear Jesus breathing those words into my ear.