



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Awake to Hope”

Isaiah 64:1-9, Mark 13:24-37

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

It snowed! The gentle welcome touch of magic to come happened this week as I mulled over what to say this morning. Snow- so beautiful. I could feel the adrenaline rise in the children in our house and the children walking along the sidewalk between our house and the hill at the school. Snow! There was nothing to do but let it baptize the world in all kinds of possibility. And of course, my mind was cast forward to one possibility- A white Christmas, warmth inside even if there is cold outside. Rosy red cheeks, and hot chocolate. The perfect setting for an advent sermon don't ya think.

Today we begin Advent, which is all about looking forward. The advent posture is tipped forward on your toes, anticipating, peaking ahead, longing.

And today in our reading from Isaiah, there is a desperate longing. Having returned to their home after years in exile, the people who longed to return discover that the restoration that they hoped for is still a long way off. Their land is wasted, their unity is fractured, their economy is in ruins, their sense of purpose is lost. They feel humiliated, powerless, alone, and they are hungry. In desperation they cry out to God, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down...”

In today's gospel reading we hear of a different kind of situation but a similar desperate longing. The early Christian community had a tense relationship with Rome, and every time a zealot group would make an attempt to destabilize the occupying Romans, all Jews and all Christians would experience persecution. Just before the destruction of the temple in the year 70, the emperor Nero had come down hard on the early Christians. All the while they longed for Jesus' promised return because then they would be free of all the pain and fear. Some, like our gospel writer, imagined and longed for a great, earth shattering return of Jesus, and it couldn't come too soon, so stay alert! Oh that you would come back in power and set things right!

Both these communities, separated by 600 years of history felt their longing for God acutely. Their suffering was obvious and their sense that the world was not as it could be was clear.

By and large, we are far more comfortable than they. Our longings are more easily ignored. In fact, in our comfort, there is a danger that we will lull ourselves into the mistaken impression that the world is just fine, thank you very much, and the small things that need to be improved are beyond our reach anyways. But friends, if we lose touch with the deep needs in our world and our lives for God's transformation, or give up on our yearning for a better world, our lives become very small.

I am reminded of a story set during a terrible earthquake in Charleston South Carolina. The earthquake struck while a proud, traditional, stately but nearly dead congregation was in worship. They were very formal, with never a quiver of spontaneous praise. But when the building started to shake, these formalists began to weep, scream, and pray at the top of their voices. Their dignity was forgotten. Every time a new tremor hit, they would cry out more vociferously than before.

Finally an old black woman who was very devout came to the front and, was watching with great pleasure as these dignified people wailed and prayed. Then when the tremors subsided and the people calmed, the old woman would pray aloud and say, “Shake ‘em agin Lawd! Shake ‘em agin!”

Sometimes we lose touch with our longings, and only reconnect with them when life is shaken. However, if we are honest with ourselves, there really is an ache within us. We know that the world is not as it could be. Even we, in North America, as anesthetised as our life often is, we feel the inequities in our world. We worry about the growing gap between rich and poor, north and south. We know the world we are handing down to our children is not as healthy as God would have it be and in our honest, truly awake moments, that makes us ache.

And we ourselves are not as we could be. We ache and our ache is about today and tomorrow. Today is depression and the ache is for relief tomorrow. Today feels empty and the ache is to be full tomorrow. Today is pregnant and the ache is for a healthy world for all children tomorrow. Today is wildly busy and the ache is for rest tomorrow. Today is unjust and the ache is that justice will roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream tomorrow. Today... well, what is your ache, your persistent longing today that may find its release tomorrow?

People of faith are people who are honest about their ache, their longing today, and how they have hope for tomorrow. Now I want to be clear. Hope is not the same thing as cheerfulness or even optimism. Cheerfulness is about whether you are happy, and people of faith have just as many times of sadness as any others. And optimism is about likelihood. It’s about whether things are looking up- trending positively. But people of faith are just as susceptible to the rise and fall of life’s circumstances. People of faith find hope in all kinds of situations in which things are likely to deteriorate.

And that is because hope is different. Hope is a choice- a compulsion. Hope means more than just hanging on. It is the conscious decision to see the world through the eyes of faith... to trust that the present reality will not have the last word... to choose to believe that God will. I hope when I choose to believe I will be ok, even when all evidence is to the contrary. I hope when I choose to believe that peace is possible, even when it looks unlikely. I hope when I choose to act upon my belief that my little part in the end of global warming will make a difference even when it does not look good.

Part of my heart and mind has been holding vigil on Burnaby Mountain these days because I believe hope is what is going on up there. Protesters are being arrested out of a need to draw a line somewhere that might wake us up to the reality of global warming, and Kinder Morgan and the federal government have provided a place for that line to be drawn. There is little chance that this protest and series of arrests will bring an end to global warming, however, hope says, do something, and see how the universe changes- place your life’s energy on the line, and watch, wait and see things change.

You see hope is a quantum approach to faith. That is, we hope because it changes things. We hope in God because that makes a difference, a tangible difference in life. As Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community once said, “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching as the evidence changes.”

And that is why hope is never passive. Despair is passive- hope is on the move. And at times it is hard to move, when the yearnings, the longings are deep and sometimes painful, the solutions to the tangles are complicated. But hope does not ask too much of us, only to wake up, to open and identify what we really yearn for, and then to take one step- the beginning step on the Advent way. Amen.