

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Luke 21:25-36

12/01/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Advent 1: Looking Up”

Pastor Amy Terhune

“It is a newspaper image I will never forget,” writes Susan R. Andrews. “And for me it is the quintessential image of Advent. The time was the early 1990s. The place was Sarajevo — the gutted, bombed out epicenter of the Balkan War — when ethnic violence had destroyed beauty and buildings and any sense of human community. One day, a man put on his tuxedo, picked up his cello and a chair, and went and sat at the central intersection of town — in the crossfire of hatred and brokenness and devastation — and there he played his cello for hours — defying all reason, embracing all hope — proclaiming through his melancholy melody that darkness and death never have the final word. [adapted from “Crisis Management” by Susan R. Andrews, www.Sermons.com.]

That’ cellists name was Vedran Smailović. He has never been simply a musician. Still today, he’s an ambassador of hope and peace and reconciliation. As I read Susan Andrew’s words, and picture that image in my mind and on the screen, I cannot help but draw certain similarities between the Advent message of Hope and the Easter message of new life. Which shouldn’t really be all that surprising. If I had to capture the saving message of Christ in just a few words, I would say that God saves by bringing light out of dark, hope out of despair, love out of hate, life out of death. God redeems by turning things around; turning things on their head, as only God can do. In fact, did you know that the word repent means “turn around”. That’s what happens when we’re saved. God literally turns our life around.

Advent finds its origins in the 5th of 6th century, and originally functioned much like the season of Lent. It was a time of fasting and repentance. In other words, a time for turning around; a time for new directions. That certainly applies to our personal lives, but it also applies to our social order. It speaks to a mindset. Christmas commemorates the first Advent of Jesus, more than 2000 years ago now in Bethlehem of Judea, when Jesus first arrived as an infant in a bleak world. But the season of Advent is a season all its own—a season that looks forward to a new day for creation. It’s a time of preparation, prayer, commitment, and anticipation for what God is still working on – the future that isn’t yet. All kinds of people like to tell us they know what it is, when it will happen, most importantly,

who will be in and who will be left out. I'm not one of those. I trust God to give me details when I need them.

As we turn to our scripture lesson for this morning, I'll admit that it sounds fantastical. The lessons for the first Sunday in advent always do. But our lesson also deals with some rather profound truth to be learned. We tend to miss them because the gospel texts we're given to study are so disconcerting. So let's dig into this stuff a little bit. In our gospel lesson for Luke, Jesus has been teaching in Jerusalem and he has just about overstayed his welcome. His trial and crucifixion are close at hand. In the shadow of the incredible temple of the Hebrew people, he is offering his disciples their final lessons. And you can be sure, given that context, that he's not teaching fear and terror. Not when fear and terror are just around the corner! Jesus has got to give them what they'll need to get through what's coming! And so he acknowledge the reality of the darkness, but what he really wants to do is teach them to see beyond it.

The first thing he tells us is: look up. Stand up and raise your heads. Look to the horizon. Look to Christ. Jesus paints a pretty dismal picture – one of humanity plagued by a climate of fear and foreboding, of distress between nations and peoples, of confusion and anxiety – which could certainly describe our world today. But it could probably describe our world at many points in history, and probably describes our future world at many junctures, too. Because our world is imperfect, broken, marred by sin, both personal and systemic. That has always been true. The answer to a fearful world isn't to silo off with others just like ourselves, it's to stand and raise our heads. Think about what that looks like. It's not an act of arrogance or pride. It's an act of courage and trust. Face the world as it is, looking to God for perspective, truth, and wisdom. Face the world with compassion. Speak truth to power. Refuse to give in to cynicism. Look for redemption. Look for healing. Look for light in the darkness, hope in despondency, love in the midst of abhorrent conditions, life in dead zones. Don't be afraid of what you see. Look for God.

Rev. Fred Rogers, who most of the world knew as Mr. Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood on PBS, retired from his long-running television show in January of 2001, although shows continued to air on PBS into the summer. He returned from retirement briefly after the attacks of Sept. 11, because who better to talk to kids about the magnitude of fear and suffering after that awful day. Frankly, who better to talk to the adults about those feelings, too, right? He told a story that week, which I understand he'd told before, but it was the first time I'd heard it. He said that when he was child and terrible things would happen, his mother would tell him to look for the helpers. Sure, there are many who cope with tragedy and horror by getting angry, vengeful, and vindictive. But there are many more of us who find we cope best with tragedy and horror in the world by trying to do good, to help, to care for others. Look for the helpers. Be the helpers. That's where we find the courage, the conviction, the hope, the love, the light in ourselves and others. Look for redemption. Look for God. You'll always find God among the helpers. I guarantee it.

Jesus also says: be alert; pay attention, stay awake, know the signs. But in this case, he's not talking just about what's taking place around us. He's talking more about what's taking place inside us. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. This cautions us against letting little things distract us from nurturing and developing our faith.

Maxie Dunnam tells a story about a man who was running down the pier, heading for the ferry boat, afraid he was not going to make it. Here was a man of some status, a man who was concerned about his dignity. Dressed in a pin-striped suit, he carried a black umbrella in one hand and a black bowler hat in the other, with which he was waving frantically at the ferry boat, yelling at them to stop so that he could get on it. He ran all the way to the end of the pier, furiously jumped and landed safely

on the deck of the boat. Very proud of himself, he straightened his tie and recovered his dignity. And it was then that he discovered that the boat was not going out; it was coming in. [from “He Came; He Is Coming” by Maxie Dunnam, www.Sermons.com.] He didn’t pay attention. He didn’t heed what should have been obvious signs.

Friends, this advent, take a breath. Don’t spend it running the dock, frantically waving at a boat coming in, filled with anxiety and a deep-seeded need to get everyone you love more stuff. That’s not the best way to experience Christ. Instead, look up to God. Look around with compassion. Look within for readiness. Wait patiently. Let the season enfold you gently. Take time to care for those in need. No, the world is not what we want it to be. It never has been. But that shouldn’t stop us from looking with hope for a world that isn’t here yet.

Let me tell you about a woman from the very first church I served in Watertown, Massachusetts. I’ll call her Debbie. Debbie was just 41 years old when her husband Steve was diagnosed with brain cancer. They fought it valiantly. They got four years—more than any doctor thought possible. And Debbie was always grateful for those four years. But by the time she was 45 years old, Debbie was a widow raising an 11-year-old son, a 14-year-old son, and a 16-year-old daughter. I can’t imagine how one lives through something like that. We offered an Advent retreat at the church that year. Two of us organized it together as a Saturday morning event—3 hours to just stop and think about what Advent meant to us all. I was still in seminary and still very nervous about my calling to pastoral ministry. Did I have what it takes? Debbie came to the retreat that morning. I remember wondering what I could possibly say to her. How could Christmas be normal for her that year? As it turned out, Debbie taught me instead. She talked about Steve and how she missed him and about the grief and the pain she was experiencing. She talked about her concerns for her children and what they were going through. She talked about some of the things she feared regarding the holiday season. But she also offered me a profound insight. Although I’ll never remember the exact words she used, I remember the sentiments. It went something like this:

“We talk at Advent about chaos and fear and the world as we know it ending. I don’t put much stock in it literally, but I know that’s how Steve’s death has felt to me—like everything was crashing down around me. But I also know that in those moments, when every light seemed to go out and I couldn’t seem to find my footing, that’s when Jesus came to me again. Only, it wasn’t the Jesus of my childhood. He wasn’t a cute little baby in a manger. He was God. He held time and life and death in his hands. And He held me...and my children...and my husband. For me, Advent is about finding patience with God, with myself, and with my grief. It’s about giving my spirit the time and space for healing. Despite everything I’ve lost, God has given us what we need to make it through. We just have to wait.”

Well, Debbie’s explanation may not be orthodox, but I can’t fault her perspective. She refused to give up on life. She harnessed hope and the power of love, and it changed *my* world. It gave me a fleeting glimpse of the Kingdom—something else to hold on to. She tied things together for me that had previously eluded me—that kingdom talk was not a theological concept but a perspective—a way of living in the world now. A way of understanding how things may, in fact, be looking up. A hope that goes deep. Music in rubble.

Some time ago a man was staying in a chalet in the Swiss Alps. Early one morning he heard what sounded like an earthquake. Hurriedly he got out of bed and ran to the front desk and asked if there was something wrong, if the mountains were breaking up? He was scared. The man at the front desk explained, “Sir, we are on the west side of the valley. As the sun comes up in the east, the snow and ice expand as they begin to warm. The expansion causes a large crashing noise. It’s not the end of the world, it’s just the beginning of a new day.” [from James O. Davis, illustrations, www.sermoncentral.com.] Amen.