

Preparing to Hope

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

November 28, 2021 - The First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

33:14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

33:15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

33:16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-28

21:25 "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.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

21:28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Sermon

I want to talk about hope for a moment. There's a tradition of lifting up Hope as a theme on this first Sunday of Advent every year. Hope is spoken of like a tangible, concrete thing. We ask people what their hopes are, as if they can simply be picked up off a shelf, chosen from a menu. We put hope on a Christmas tree ornament.

There's a special challenge to that kind of hope this year, I think. For a lot of us, our spirits are tender. We're a little raw. We have been sitting in the CoVid space for a long time. We've lost friends, lost routines, and the world is a bit of a mess. We have kept

our caution tanks full. Those of us who had Thanksgiving with a group may be feeling anxious; those who stayed alone feel the weight of isolation growing. It might be hard to be optimistic.

But hope is not optimistic.

And hope is not an item to pick up off a store shelf.

Hope is not a noun we possess.

Hope is a verb that we practice.¹

Hope does not deny the hardships that we face. Indeed, hope speaks to how we deal with hardship. Hope does not ignore reality but determines to work for a better future. In the Christian tradition, hope is a kingdom verb. Hope prays, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, even knowing that right now, earth is not like heaven. Hope prays, and then hope practices.

The world was not okay in Jeremiah's time. His people were facing exile, experiencing total disruption, separated from their loved ones, wondering where God was. Does this sound familiar to any of you?

So Jeremiah spoke truth - about the crisis the people faced. He called people and rulers to account and repentance. This is what prophets do.

But a good prophet can sit with present pain, and call for a different way. A good prophet can acknowledge hardship and say it is not the end of the story. Jeremiah does this. He preaches of God's promise of a future with hope.

33:14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

The days are surely coming.

There is good news coming, and we are invited to be a part of it.² There is good news coming.

¹ This is something Jess Young Chang said in conversation this week, and I thank her for inspiring the theme of this sermon.

² Inspired by the Pulpit Fiction podcast.

In the Gospel of Luke, we hear the Gospel writer's reflection on a most challenging time. There are things happening that will shake and shape the earth and the people of God, but Luke tells us that Jesus preached against fear - Jesus lifted up a vision of a world to come. As Matt Myer-Boulton puts it, "When death-dealing forces seemed to have the upper hand, as they did when Roman troops destroyed the Jerusalem Temple shortly before Luke was written, one ancient literary response was to envision an imminent divine rescue and a new era of justice and redemption." So this text and other apocalyptic Gospel texts we read every Advent are not about Jesus' coming birth - rather, Jesus was speaking to the signs and wonders and terrors of his own day. Jesus says, when we see these things we are not to despair or be afraid. Instead, he says, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Stand tall, raise your heads, be alert, be ready, do not become inured to the crisis around you, but live in hope for a new way of being. Jesus told his disciples how to live in hope even in the most difficult times.

A few years ago, butterfly counters noticed something terrible. Migratory monarch numbers were down by a terrible amount. It got worse and worse. From a million monarchs a year in the 90s, down to 30,000 three years ago, down to 2,000 last year.

But monarch counters and entymologists and environmentalists and back yard gardeners have not given up. They have not counted the monarchs out, rather they have taken steps, small and large, to be alert and ready, to live in hope, to believe that the days are surely coming. Particularly, they have prepared habitats and planted milkweed - you've heard me speak of the wonders of milkweed.

And this year. The annual count, which was down to 2,000 last year, this year there were 100,000 monarchs counted.³

One volunteer said it this way: ""I think this is really good reason to take heart that there might still be time to make a difference."

Butterflies, in Christian symbolism, mean new life, and resurrection, and hope. The worst thing is never the last thing.

We may worn out, we may be weary, we may be worried. But the prophets tell us that the days are surely coming. So have hope. Jesus spoke to a crowd that was beaten down, and he said,

³ <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/26/1059263867/the-butterflies-are-back-annual-migration-of-monarchs-shows-highest-numbers-in-y>

“stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And this is the life of faith - when injustice is on the rise, we stand up and plan for justice. When the world is breaking apart and its creatures in danger, we plant trees and milkweed - and less poetically we change systems that are dependent on fossil fuels and pollutants. When we are troubled, we practice hope. And we are never alone in our hope. We are never alone.

Professor Kelly Brown Douglas speaks this way of living, this way of practicing hope. “This means we are to live proleptically, that is, as if the new heaven and the new earth are already. Thus, our sense of values, our sense of justice and what is right and wrong is not to be constrained by what is, rather it is to be oriented toward God’s future, that is, toward what will be.”⁴

We’re in an in-between season, between CoVid and - we pray - post-Covid. We’re in an almost season - Jesus is here, is almost here, will be here. And we are - or, I would say, we should be - in a season of stubborn hope. Kate Bowler describes it, “the stubborn hope of Christmas, joy in the midst of sorrow, a love that knows no bounds, and a transcendent peace amid a world on fire.”⁵ But this peace is not just for us, and this hope is especially not just for us. This hope is what the we need, our children need, our neighbors need, the world needs. And so it is for us, today, Christians awaiting Christ, to practice hope as a verb, offered to the world.

On this Advent Hope Sunday I invite you to prepare to hope.

If you are hurting, please know that you are not alone. You are part of a world in pain.

And yet.

“The troubles in the world and our lives are real. God’s hope is also real.”⁶

On this Sunday of Hope, I invite you to practice hope. Make hope a verb. Say to yourself, even so, I am not the only one with hope. I am part of a community that chooses to practice hope. Even acknowledging the harsh realities around me, I will move toward Christmas with a creative and giving spirit, with yearning and tenderness, compassion for those in pain, and a faith that proclaims:

⁴ <https://feminismandreligion.com/2014/12/16/to-be-an-advent-people-by-kelly-brown-douglas/>

⁵ Kate Bowler’s 2021 Advent Devotional

⁶ Diane Strickland, Working Preacher

The days are surely coming.

So with the prophets let us prepare to hope. Let us prepare for Christ's inbreaking into this hurting world, let us prepare ourselves for a future with hope.

For Jesus,
Sweet baby Jesus,
Salty prophetic Jesus,
Compassionate Risen Jesus,
Is coming,
Is coming,
Is coming.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come now. We are waiting for you in active hope.

Amen.

Benediction:

This Advent season,
May you
Raise your heads,
Live truthfully,
Hope fiercely,
Love extravagantly
And welcome your Redeemer,
The one who is surely coming. Amen.