

Homily: Luke 21:25-36
Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA
Sunday, November 28, 2021: Advent I
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.

The rural farm in Warren County was one of my all-time favorite living spaces. Ten acres, with the house facing south and an open horizon. I would be out on the screen porch with coffee awaiting that first glimmer of pink light in the eastern sky.

Our lives resemble that moment. We live in a world with darkness aplenty—violence, bigotry, suffering, chaos—and we are living in hope of the coming of God’s kingdom in Christ. We look east, so to speak, for the dawn of God’s new creation in Christ.

Yet, our world hastens from The Great Pumpkin to Christmas, with barely a pause for Thanksgiving. We get bombarded with Christmas music in the shopping areas in November. Advent gives us a moment to pause in our darkness. We can pretend Jesus has not yet been born, and creates a space in which to hold our broken dreams and frustrated hopes.

Jeremiah repeats the hope for a coming savior “in those days” – in a future time that has not arrived. Luke uses phrases like “people will faint from fear and foreboding.” We can identify with those fears.

Advent Speaks of the Gloomy Side of Life

People begin putting up Christmas trees right after Thanksgiving. Non-liturgical churches begin having Christmas dramas early in December. Nativity scenes with Jesus in the manger begin appearing. Christmas carols begin being sung.

Meanwhile, here we are, with crèches in which we don’t put the baby Jesus until December 24, with people waiting to put up trees until near the end of Advent, shopping in stores for Christmas gifts while singing gloomy Advent hymns and not singing Christmas carols until Christmas Eve. Priests wearing dark blue and purple vestments. Hope anticipates the light in the darkness – all three readings are about anticipation, about waiting. We are not yet to Christmas—the time of light. Dark color – blue/purple – Christmas – white.

We do this because we understand that this season symbolizes hope and anticipation not yet realized. We build into our liturgical year a season that symbolizes despair and unfulfilled, delayed promises from God.

Life can be gloomy and confusing. Disease that persists, depression that settles over us like a dark cloud, relationships that just won't seem to work, addictions that won't let us go. Climate change that is melting the polar ice caps and already changing our climate. Young people still dying in combat. Mass shootings in schools and public places.

Add to that the confusion that seems to dominate our era. What is truth? What can one believe? Where is the solid ground? Vaclav Havel, first President of the Czech Republic put it well in a speech in Philadelphia:

"And thus today we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. We enjoy all the achievements of modern civilization that have made our physical existence on this earth easier in so many important ways. Yet we do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. The world of our experiences seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing. There appear to be no integrating forces, no unified meaning, no true inner understanding of phenomena in our experience of the world. Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. In short, we live in the postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain."

Vaclav Havel, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World," Speech delivered at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, PA, July 4, 1994, <http://www.worldtrans.org/whole/havelspeech.html>

So, we resist the speedy onslaught of Christmas, sing our gloomy Advent hymns, and live in a four-Sunday period that symbolizes how gloomy life can remain. We can do this. We can await the birth of Jesus as if it has not yet happened. As Presbyterian clergy person John Buchanan put it.

"One problem with appreciating Advent is that many people want to sing Christmas carols, not Advent hymns. I try to tell people about the tradition of waiting in the darkness, anticipating the light. But they say, 'It's too gloomy.'" [John M. Buchanan, "Deepening Darkness," in *The Christian Century*, Vol. 123, No. 24, November 28, 2006, p. 3.]

But, we side with Roethke, as he wrote in his poem, "In a Dark Time,"

**What's madness but nobility of soul
At odds with circumstance?**

[Theodore Roethke, from "In a Dark Time," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 231.]

Advent Speaks of the Power of Hope

What recourse do we have when illness persists, depression deepens, addiction tightens its grip, relationships crumble, the globe warms, and confusion dominates our culture? Ancient peoples did at least three things. First, They wrote laments. See Psalm 23 and Psalm 77 for two of those. Jesus lamented over an unresponsive Jerusalem. Much of our modern poetry, movies, and pop music lament the state of affairs. They hoped for a better future. And, they lived toward that future, stretching toward a better day in hope.

The pop group U 2 gives us one example in their song “Peace on Earth.”

Jesus this song you wrote

The words are sticking in my throat

Peace on Earth

Hear it every Christmas time

But hope and history won’t rhyme

So what’s it worth

This peace on Earth?

[U2 CD "All that You Can't Leave Behind" (Universal International Music, 2000)]

Second, we can hope. What IS hope? Hope leans into a future not yet here and lives toward it convinced that God’s future will come. Hope anticipates the end of a hurricane when the winds are at 150 mph. Hope is Charlie Brown going back to the pumpkin patch every Halloween night to await the arrival of the Great Pumpkin. Hope is a football team playing just as hard in the last few minutes when they’re behind by two touchdowns. Hope is a group of high school kids maintaining the same stretch of highway by picking up the same litter every month.

We develop night vision as people of faith. We see glimmers of new creation dawning in the darkness all around us. Every time a hungry person gets fed, there is new creation. Every healing signals new creation. Every time a powerless person gets justice, that is new creation. Every time multinational corporations get frustrated clearing rain forest, that is a sign of new creation. We lean toward the full sunrise with those hints of pink sky in our darkness. Roethke put it so well in the opening lines of that poem, “In a Dark Time.”

“In a dark time,

the eye begins to see.

[Theodore Roethke, from "In a Dark Time," *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 231]

I learned, in those dark mornings in Warren County, that the birds begin to sing in the dark, before the sky starts to turn pink. They are singing. They can't see to fly, but somehow they know the sun is about to rise. So, we can develop our night vision in Advent and sing in the dark because we know the sun is rising.

As Havel said in that address in Philadelphia:

"I am not an optimist because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is a feeling that life and work have meaning. You either have it or you don't, regardless of the state of the world around you. Life without hope is an empty, boring, and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself."

[Vaclav Havel, cited by Martin E. Marty, *Context*, Feb 15, 92, p. 1.]

Third, because we have God's Spirit in our hearts, we can lean into our hope with action. Do we really believe there will be new creation and resurrection? Then, we live into that hope. If new creation ends hunger, we feed the hungry now. If new creation ends injustice, we fight injustice now. If new creation, means all will know God's nature, then we witness to God's saving love now. If new creation heals the wounds to creation, then we fight for the preservation of the environment now. We can live like there will be a new earth where polar icecaps don't melt while we fight to reduce the pollutants that create the warming. And, hope pushes against the darkness of depression because it cannot but reach toward the God on the other side. Hope endures the crumbling of a relationship because it knows its relationship with God will never fail.

In Advent, we celebrate God's ability to sustain us, to keep us stretching toward a future too wonderful to imagine and too promising to give up on. We celebrate God's ability to keep us moving, to keep us obeying, to keep us worshipping even when it's gloomy. We ask God to fan the flames of our simmering hope. As U2 sings in that lament.

**Jesus could you take the time
To throw a drowning man a line**

[U2 CD "All that You Can't Leave Behind" (Universal International Music, 2000)]

So, today, we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven," because we know that's not yet true, and because, no matter how gloomy, we cannot give up our belief that it will be true. Darkness will not have the last word.

My invitation to you

Emily Dickinson did not entitle her poems. She numbered them.

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**“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –**

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard -

[Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 116]

What next step would you take if you had hope? Take it as though you do have hope and watch the ground under you grow firm.

What is the song in your soul today? Can you hear it in spite of the gale? You may be singing in the dark, but we know the sun will rise.