

Sermon for December 1, 2024

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Jeremiah 33:14-16 Psalm 25:1-10 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 Luke 21:25-36

Advent 1 Hope for a World Falling Apart

My sermon title today is “Hope for a World Falling Apart”, not hope for a falling world. I think it will make more sense that way.

Today’s texts are not what we expect to hear in the lead-up to a holly, jolly Christmas. Black Friday may sound ominous but presumably shoppers were excited and happy as they came home with their treasures. And now here we are on Advent 1, four weeks before Christmas.

This year we’ll be reading from Luke’s gospel which offers stories of shepherds and angels, a babe in a manger, lost sheep, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan – so many of our favourite stories. Each Sunday in Advent we will focus on a different word: hope, peace, joy and love. For Advent 1, the watchword is hope.

What are we to make of Jesus’ dire pronouncements in today’s text? Here we are gathered, away from the relentless Christmas carols played in stores; away from Black Friday bargains; away from wish lists and parties and Christmas movies to consider the state of the world and the word, Hope. Our falling-apart world does not appear to abound in hope. And yet today we are invited to consider what gives us hope.

You may have heard that about a dozen of us at MacNeill have been reading together a book called, Life After Doom. For five Thursdays we’ve

gathered in the parlour for a simple meal of bread and soup and cheese, and a cookie or square. Then we've talked about this book by Brian D. McLaren.

You want to have friends around when you tackle this one. That's no surprise with a book called Life After Doom. Its sub-title is less daunting: Wisdom and courage for a world falling apart. Nevertheless, chapter two is very daunting. The author is very convincing in describing our future in a world facing climate change. It really will do more than affect the weather. It will cause terrible changes to our political, economic and social systems. It helped me, before reading chapter 2, to read the words of the American writer and civil rights leader, James Baldwin: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus is trying to help his disciples face up to a catastrophic future. They are gathered at the Temple in Jerusalem where Jesus is teaching. Someone speaks about how wonderful the temple is, adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.

Jesus responds, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Catastrophe awaits. Cosmic catastrophe. He speaks of signs in the sun, moon and stars; of roaring seas; of people crying out. He says, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...wars and insurrections, famine and plagues..." Jesus goes on to say people must flee the city at that time or slaughtered or taken away as slaves.

We might wonder how Jesus knows what will happen. Does he have second sight? Does he have special powers from God to see the future? If Jesus is fully human, then, no. But Jesus does know that such catastrophes have

happened before in Israel's life. He may be remembering the prophet Jeremiah who was writing at the time when the armies of Babylon were destroying the city and its temple and marching the survivors into exile. And we know that only 60 years later, the Assyrian Empire conquered the Babylonians and the remnant of the exiled were permitted to return home and to beginning to rebuild. Jeremiah writes about that homecoming: "In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety." One empire ends and another rises to power.

Similarly catastrophic events took place in the time when Luke was writing his gospel, about 50 years after Jesus' life and death. It was a violent period in Israel's history. There revolts against the Romans, quelled by slaughter such as that at Masada. Of course there were sounds of battle! In the year 70 C.E, Jerusalem really was burning, the battle smoke blocking sun and moon. Burning was the Romans' favourite way to defeat a city.

Jesus describes the catastrophes to come, knowing how in the past kingdoms have arisen and fallen. He tells his followers to flee the city in that day. He tells the disciples they will be arrested, persecuted, stoned and crucified – as indeed, happens. Luke writes his gospel from Ephesus, in Turkey. He was perhaps one who fled the city or one forcibly resettled in far-flung parts of the Empire.

We only have to watch the evening news to see violent worlds clashing in our day, people fleeing ruined cities, taking crowded roads with what little they can carry, burying their dead along the way, trying to find sanctuary. Catastrophe, indeed.

Perhaps for our times, a bigger threat even than wars and cities, is the looming battle against climate change. Those of us reading Life After Doom have been sobered? frightened? shaken? by what McLaren says our future holds. We may not see those days, but our children and grandchildren may.

Listen to the writer, Mark Maslin as he describes the seven stages of climate denial: 1. It's not real. 2. It's not us. 3. It's not that bad. 4. We have time. 5. It's too expensive to fix. 6. Here's a fake solution. 7. It's too late: you should have warned us earlier.

So, where is hope in all this? I'm not speaking of optimism or wishful thinking. I'm speaking of hope. How, then, are we to live once we stop sweeping climate change under the rug and face up to reality? Here's where Jesus' words to his followers who faced catastrophe can help us. He tells them, be on guard. Be alert. Don't let your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life and that day of doom catch you unawares, like a trap. Be ready for those dark times. Pray. Depend upon one another. Act ethically. And watch for signs that give hope. And we know his ministry was about healing, about restoring people to communities and gathering people into a new family.

That's what has been so brilliant about these sessions we call "Bread for the Body, Food for the Soul." I Love that Bob had the courage and wisdom to gather a group to read the book together. We could share our anxieties and our grief. We could get to know each other a little better, to hear people speak from the heart. We could read together those chapters that offer hope. And we could

come up with ways to draw more people into a conversation about a path forward – which is what I’ve been doing today.

The Bible says an enormous amount about hope. Faithful readers learn that out of great despair is born hope. It comes not by power or politics, but in the birth of a baby into poverty and danger.

The times of exile were, for Israel, the times when hope was nearly lost, except among the great prophets who envisioned a return. But more important than city and Temple rebuilding was the call of God to be a new people. A faith community. The safest place for the returning exiles to experience a renewal of hope was in fellowship, in community.

In this unlikely hour, our faith calls us to watch for transformation, for glimmers of hope and healing, for what Luke calls the kingdom of God already begun. Gathering at the communion table is one sign of hope. Here we face the reality of Jesus’ death, the suffering and compassion of Jesus. We sing, even at the grave, as it were; sing our praise to God. We remember. We hear once more those ancient words as we eat and drink: each time you do this, remember me. And we do remember the transforming one, the suffering and dying one, the risen one. We remember the one who has come, the one who is always coming, the one who will come again, Jesus Christ. Amen