

Sermon for December 3, 2023

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Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Hope Blooming Wild

When we read of children in distress, taken hostage, walking and walking, hungry, thirsty, afraid...well, we enter into their suffering, do we not? I have read that in times of war, women and children are in the greatest peril. I once asked Ray Hobbs, professor of Old Testament theology and my mentor, “How did the Israelites get all that way to Babylon from their ruined city of Jerusalem?” Silly question, I guess. They didn’t catch a bus or ride camels. Ray answered, “They walked.”

It was about 1,500 kilometers that they walked, women and children and the men not slaughtered in the final siege and burning of their city. Just imagine what that looked like and sounded like!

But wait, we don’t have to imagine that scene at all. We see it every night on the news. And it’s heart-breaking, especially the sight of all those children. The war between Ukraine and Russia has included tens of thousands of Ukrainian children, kidnapped and taken to Russia for what is called, “re-education.” In Sudan, warlords are willfully murdering women and children in the war there. In Myanmar, soldiers are targeting infants in particular. It’s enough to put us into a state of despair.

Such despair today, like that centuries ago, always accompanies war. On this first Sunday in Advent – Hope Sunday—we call it, we may well ask ourselves where hope is to be found.

In the time of the exile to Babylon, it was the poets and prophets who looked at their ruined cities and the poor captives and said, “Still, there is hope. They saw the forced marches, the sorrow and hunger of the exiles and said, “Here hope is to be found. Despair is the very cradle of hope for God’s people.”

These poets and prophets used vivid images to describe the way everything was coming apart. They described the coming catastrophe in cosmic terms. The stars would fall, the heavens open, mountains quake and God’s people be like dried leaves blown away by the wind. Remember Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones? The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “The fruitful land has become a desert.”

Jesus prophesies in today’s reading as well. Earlier he had pointed to the Temple and declared, “Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” He goes on to speak of the day to come in metaphors, even using hyperbole or exaggeration to make his point. He says it will be as if the sun grows dark and the moon as well. The powers in the heavens will be shaken.

And yet, and yet...all these poet prophets also paint a picture of a people restored; of a land blooming and producing harvest once more; of streams in the desert, all images of hope.

I want to share a few sentences from one of Ray’s sermon on this Mark text, a few years back. He wrote, “Out of darkness and despair, hope is born. Hope is shaped, hope is given and hope is once again enjoyed. It comes not by power or politics, but in the birth of a baby into poverty and danger.”

This is what Advent is about. It’s about times when hope is hard to find; when despair is deep and dark. It’s about staying alert. It’s about keeping watch.

Advent asks us not to divert our eyes and stop up our ears, but to look and listen deeply. It's about being faithful in our prayers and waiting with patience because we do not know when will be the time when the promised reign of God will come in its full power. And we have the guidance of ancient prophets and poets to sustain us for this in-between time of watchfulness.

Did you hear the words of the choir anthem last Sunday? It's about the "kingdom" or the "reign" of God. I've always been deeply moved by these words:

And lo! already on the hills

the flags of dawn appear,,,,

proclaim that day is near

when justice will be clothed with might

and every hurt be healed.

We wait and we watch for transformation, for glimmers of hope and healing, those flags of dawn appearing where we least expect them.

The television news and the newspaper essays can inform us of the suffering of people caught up in wars and facing exile. They can focus our attention on the despair of people, especially for the plight of children, and we do need to need to know what is happening. But news sources cannot grant us hope or show us the way through sorrow and loss. That's not the job of journalists. For hope we turn to our ancient Scriptures. There we find consolation. We find powerful promises about restoration, words of hope, words of instruction. And

we remember that it is in the community of the faithful that such hope may be nurtured.

Here is healing: the feeding of the hungry, the restoring of sight – or insight; the deep listening or hearing; the honouring of freedom; the compassion for the weakest, here and far away. Here is hope blooming wild in the most unexpected places. Take a moment to admire the table Candace has created for this “hope blooming wild” theme.

Today we are invited to gather at the table, in a quiet room. To be still. To consider that our messy, busy, tedious, lonely lives are even now being transformed. We look to a table covered in a white cloth. There are shining plates, a loaf of bread, cups of wine. Here our church family will gather, those in this sanctuary and those worshipping with us on-line. Here is music. Here are hands ready to give and to receive.

In this moment we know we will hear those ancient words: each time you do this, remember me. We will remember the transforming one, the healing one, the suffering and dying one, the risen one. the who has come, who is always coming, who will come again, Jesus Christ. Amen