

**“Strengthen your hearts in holiness”**  
**Jeremiah 33:14-16      1 Thessalonians 3:9-13      Luke 21:25-36**

I want to begin this morning by wishing all of you, “Happy New Year!” Some of you may think that this is one way of bypassing all of the holiday stress – just push the fast forward, by pass all of the festivities and all of the stressors of the holiday season and go directly into the new year. That may be tempting for some, but that is not my intention.

This is the first Sunday of the church year. Every year we go through this to some degree in the church. We want to get the Christmas decorations up (I got a little help at least because of the Thanksgiving holiday); we want to start singing Christmas carols (they are very beautiful); we want to get into the spirit of the season. So the timing for Advent seems not quite natural; we have to move to a different drummer to sense the distinct and subtle rhythms of the season of Advent.

But it is worth the effort. It is worth the effort because within the difficult rhythms of Advent is the substance that can rescue our worship from being exercises in nostalgia or sentimentality.

The beginning of Advent is an extension of the conclusion of the Bible. If you want, turn to the last page in your Bible, not the maps or indexes but the end of Revelation, look at the next to the last verse: **“The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.”** And it concludes, **“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”** Advent begins with the hope of the coming again of Jesus Christ! This is a particular and peculiar dimension of hope. It is a hope based in the power of God’s promises!

But it may be helpful for us to realize that there is more than one way to experience time. Our most common understanding of time is the kind of time that is measured by a watch and a calendar. We could call that worldly time. The Greek word for it is *chronos*. The image that is helpful here is a straight line with a middle point, where we stand, that is called the Present. This line is always moving past us like a conveyor belt. At times it feels as if it is moving far too fast. On the left is the Past, where all our present moments continually flow and turning into history and becoming the Past. On the right is the Future, which is always moving toward the Present, but never actually arrives.

This is the way we usually think of time and the way we usually record history. When we talk about learning from the past and planning for the future it is *chronos* time that is our reference. But, it is not the same as spiritual time, it does not and cannot account for the way we experience time in the deepest parts of our hearts and in our soul. This is not the dimension in which we experience God.

And, you may not realize this, but this notion of time is also fairly recent in human existence. For most of the history of humankind we experienced time very differently. The pattern was not so much a line as a circle. The cycles of sun, moon, and stars; the

pattern of seasons, Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall; the cycles of birth, life and death in which all forms of created life finds its rhythms. Plants, animals, human beings all find their rhythms in these cycles. These cycles are less artificial than thinking of time as a line. The circle of life expands the one dimensional timeline into a two-dimensional image and so it is capable of taking in a lot more reality. It is less abstract, truer to experience, and it takes into account the fundamental patterns of creation, but it still lacks a spiritual dimension.

What it doesn't include is the possibility of growth. When we view all of life as a continuing cycle we can easily come to the conclusion that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The cycle doesn't account for the realities of faith, hope, and love. Faith, hope, and love add a new dimension to the cycle.

If we need an image to envision it perhaps you can visualize a spiral that incorporates a third dimension, a circle that grows outward and upward as well. It grows in both a vertical and a horizontal dimension, combining the straight line of past, present, and future with the cycles of the season along with the greater dimensions of the height and depth of eternity. The Greek word for this concept of time is *kairos*. It is this dimension that makes life sacred and holy and has the potential to transform it into eternity.

Years, seasons, months, weeks, days, and hours, all make concentric circles that lead deeper and deeper into the center which is the present moment. It is the present moment where we live in the presence of God. It is the present moment where we live in relationship. The gift of the present moment is the eternal presence of God. So, Happy New Year!

The image of hope that is suggested by the scriptures on this first Sunday of Advent is a tree. We might think of an evergreen or Christmas tree. We celebrated Thanksgiving up at my sister's in Orlando. Because of work schedules we got together on Friday. My sister had used Thursday to put up her Christmas tree – she is the efficient one in the family – but she wasn't satisfied because some of the lights were blinking and some were always on and the way she had put them on there was a band of solid colored lights, then a band of blinking lights, then a band of solid lights, and then another band of blinking lights (she would die if she knew I was telling you about this), but an evergreen tree is not what is envisioned here. The texts for today do not speak of hope in the context of decoration or beauty, they speak of intense suffering which leads to hope.

Jeremiah was a prophet to a people in exile who had lost everything – homeland, temple, possessions, family members, friends, freedom, nationhood, everything that gave them meaning – all gone. So the tree that symbolizes all of this is a stump, a tree that has been cut off and has no signs of life.

Jeremiah tells the people that God will cause new life, hope, justice, and righteousness to come from this stump. What appears dead will give birth to new life and a new beginning. Looking at a dead stump is not an inspiring symbol of hope, this is a lot to

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ask people to believe. But think about it; when you see a stump not everything of that tree has been destroyed. The root system is still intact, and it is the roots that contain what is of most value in the life of a tree.

This people still had memories. They still had the Torah and a whole history with this God whose name was too holy to utter. There was substance to the prophet's words of hope, "The days are surely coming, says JHWH, when I will fulfill my promises."

The source of hope for these people was not made real by optimism for the retail or the business cycle or by faith in any of our circumstances. The hope of Advent is made real by going deeper into the roots of our faith in God.

So, do you have any stumps in your life? Have you experienced significant loss? Have you experienced being in exile? Where are your roots? How are those roots remembered? How might you draw strength from those roots? Are you being challenged to let go of a past that is truly not retrievable so that you can live into a future emerging from your roots that possibly you still cannot yet see? That is the hope of Advent. It is a hope that invites us and challenges us to take the time to go deeper in our faith, to go deeper in our relationship with Christ. To grow deeper in our capacity to love and be loved.

When we experience stumps in our lives there is often if not always the temptation to throw in the towel and call for the stump grinding machine. But the prophet tells God's people not to give up on God's promises, not to just make the best of a bad situation – after all, "when in Babylon, do as the Babylons do" – no, when rooted in faith in God it is always too early to give up because we trust in the promises of God – "surely the days are coming ...". Hold your heads up! Stay alert! That is the challenging hope we hear in Luke's gospel.

In Luke's gospel the days described seem like the end of the world. In the ancient world it was believed that only God acting could bring about the end of the world. We no longer live in that ancient world. In the chronos of our present humankind has achieved the capacity to destroy our world. We have the capacity to destroy ourselves by violent means, up to and including nuclear weapons; we are also on the fast track to destroy ourselves environmentally if we do not take decisive steps in our generation. Extreme poverty and disease are already claiming a daily toll on our planet.

The apocalyptic images in Luke were prompted by Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. By the time the gospel of Luke was written that destruction was already a reality. So the logic here is that if Jesus could predict the destruction of the Temple, then we would be wise to be attentive to what he has to say about the future of God's kingdom as well.

And Jesus tells a brief parable using a tree again. And again the tree is a symbol of hope, a sign that God's kingdom is imminent. He says, "Look at the fig tree and all of the trees." Jesus is saying that signs of the flourishing of God's kingdom are as plentiful

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as the trees that surround us. The sign of the flourishing of the kingdom of God is the sprouting of the leaves.

Have you ever planted a tree? Years ago I worked for a brief time for a landscape contractor. One of the jobs we worked on was to plant trees in the median of a new highway. It was the middle of the summer and it was hot work, but it was good work. We dug the holes and put the trees in the hole. We carefully pulled the burlap sack from around the root ball, securely packed the dirt around it, staked the trunks so they would have some stability until the roots took hold then for days after we would thoroughly water them. When they were all planted they made an impressive looking job, but we couldn't tell how good a job we had done until the following spring when we went by to see if the branches were sprouting new leaves. That was the real test to determine if the root system had taken place.

If we had not been attentive to the root system there would be no leaves sprouting, just some old dead branches. So the encouragement of this parable is the same as the prophet – take the time to go deep in your faith – be attentive to nurturing your roots in faith and love – those are the real nutrients of hope in Jesus Christ. It is that hope that yearns for and longs for Christ to return.

The roots of our faith are true, “heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away,” so it is not a matter of if but when, and Jesus wants us to be ready. How do we do that? By keeping alert, by continuing to put our hope in our loving God, by participating in the kingdom work of doing justice acting with mercy and walking humbly in fellowship with each other and with the least of these.

We cannot wait by sitting on our hands; we will never remain prepared in that way. We long for the return of Christ especially when we see the suffering and the need that surrounds us, but our alertness will not let us be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.

We are to work for justice, now.

We are to love mercy, today.

We are to walk humbly each day.

We are not obligated to complete the work but neither does that mean that we are free to abandon it.

Our longing for the return of Christ and our hope empowers us to realize that each of us is an integral part of what God is up to in this world. In this season of Advent we remember that God enters the world in unexpected and wonderful ways in order to bring all of creation to its fulfillment. Our hope is that its completion lies in the hands of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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