

A Hopeful Wonder

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

First Sunday of Advent - November 28, 2021

Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

SCRIPTURE READING Jeremiah 33:14-16

The people of ancient Israel hoped for the birth of a descendant of David, their greatest king.

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. 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. 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.”

GOSPEL READING Luke 21:25-36

Fear and foreboding are the opposite of the wonderful hope that promises the coming of God among us.

“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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.



Did you hear the news about the tiny spacecraft launched by NASA this week? They aimed it at a little asteroid in hopes of knocking it just a bit off its orbit around another asteroid. Impact will happen sometime next September. Then, in 2024, they’ll take another look to see if it actually did the job.

Photo: The SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket launches with the Double Asteroid Redirection Test (DART) spacecraft on board. *The Atlantic Photos of the Week.*

Why pick on a little rock that never did us any harm, just minding its own business several hundred million miles away? The theory is that if we succeed, we'll be able to deflect other asteroids that might pose an actual threat to earth's existence, even though such a collision is not expected in any of our lifetimes. *It's good to know someone's thinking ahead, right?*

The story caught my attention because it reminded me of today's reading about the shaking in the heavens and the chaos on earth supposedly heralding Jesus' second coming. This ominous prophesy fed my childhood terrors. Only years later did I come to believe that Jesus' words were not meant to foment fear but to instill hope. "Do not be weighed down," he says, "with dissipations and drunkenness, or by the worries of this life." He's talking about two forms of addiction: numbing ourselves to what's happening in the world by grabbing and gobbling up all we can, or feeding our own fears until they consume us. Both are easy to do, but solve nothing.

What are you afraid of? Something way out there, like an asteroid crashing into our atmosphere and destroying the earth? Or something more concrete but still uncertain as to timing, like climate change? Or the imminent takeover of our country by forces of darkness (whoever you take them to be)? Or something more immediate and personal, threatening you or someone you love, like the new variant of covid, or another diagnosis? How is fear strangling your life?

I've said it before and I'll say it again: "Fear is a great jailer and a terrible teacher." Fear keeps us locked up in a prison of our own making. The first turn away from fear is perplexity. Asking, "How do I escape this dungeon?" Perplexity starts us wondering, scratching our heads, searching for a different way of being. It's said that for the great philosopher Socrates, who died in 399 BC, "Perplexity is what fuels inquiry and the discovery of truths worth living by. Wisdom begins with wonder in the face of perplexity, especially about how rightly to live."¹ Yes, the sheer dilemma of how to live in this world has had people scratching their heads for millenia. And wondering turns to wonder, and wonder neutralizes anxiety about what we don't understand.

Wonder is what takes our breath away when we witness a beauty beyond our making and beyond our comprehension: the northern lights blazing across the sky, a sunrise over the ocean, the birth of a child, the unfolding of a flower. Wonder makes us, well, wonder what we are doing here and how we can do it better, how we can live up to the urgencies of our own lives, in a way.

My grandfather invented an all-purpose wonder word: Purpaleanie! Purpaleanie described everything indescribable and enticing, anything that ignited the spirit to acts of heroism and adventure. My poet uncle later wrote of how it shaped him as a child almost 100 years ago:

I had only seen pictures of airplanes.
Once one that was lost
flew over our pasture

¹ William Schweiker, e-zine *Sightings*, November 18, 2021.

when Dad and I were
herding cows toward
the barn. They ran
away, frightened.
I was frightened
too, not that it
would hurt us,
but that we
wouldn't
live up
to the
event.
"May I
call to
it, Pa?"
"Go ahead."
So I called louder
than I knew I could:
"Purpaleanie!"

When I had
proclaimed the sum of wisdom--
a fitting response to any visitor from
heaven--I was not frightened any more.²

Like my uncle, I sometimes fear I won't live up to the events happening around me: how am I supposed to respond to all the things that might not scare the cows as his airplane did, but that I somehow feel responsible for, like global warming, or the refugee crisis, or ending racism, or fixing our fractured political situation? How am I supposed to deflect the juggernaut of history that seems to be hurtling toward us here and now, right where God put me? Jesus' warning to the disciples was to stay awake, stay alert, not to be weighed down by numbing addictions but to be buoyed up by hope; not to hide from what we don't understand, but to greet it with an open mind. To wonder until wondering turns to awe and amazement at God's infinite goodness and mercy that somehow have endured through all generations, and still endure.

The prophet Jeremiah, who lived at the same time as Socrates, spoke to a people as fearful as we are today and turned their fear to wonder, and their wonder to hope. When he said, "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, you will be saved and will live in safety," he was not so much predicting the birth of a baby named Jesus as he was promising hope. Hope of restoration. Hope for a future

² Stanley Wiersma, *Purpaleanie and other Permutations*, Middleburg Press, 1978

where God's righteousness would prevail and people would be freed from the physical grip of oppression and the spiritual vise of fear. Four hundred years later, those who followed Jesus found in him the fulfilment of those words: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Sometimes it seems kind of absurd that the birth of a baby in circumstances clouded by centuries of history should still inspire hope in our fearful world. It's a wonder, and a miracle. God's project seems unbelievable, almost like shooting a spacecraft the size of a vending machine at an asteroid the size of a football stadium hundreds of millions of miles away to impact it and deflect its orbit, and thus ensure our future safety. And yet, we do believe the promise launched by the prophet Jeremiah could come to life 400 hundred years later in a baby born in Bethlehem. And we believe that the hope pinned to that child's life, death, and resurrection continues its trajectory to impact and deflect the evil that paralyzes us even now, to set us free and lead us to living rightly, righteously, even in an age that feels so wrong in so many ways.

Does this make any sense? What I'm trying to say is that the hope we re-ignite this first day of Advent, 2021, is a hope that has been speeding like a rocket toward us for 2400 years and more, and continues to light our way into the future. *Aren't you glad someone was thinking ahead?* You see, it's not a cause for fear; but if you are still afraid, I pray your fear may lead to perplexity, your perplexity to wonder, your wonder to awe, and your awe to the sure and certain hope that you are alive for a reason, and this is cause for rejoicing. Lay aside your fears in hopeful wonder. As the Apostle Paul wrote 2000 years ago to a fearful, wondering people: "Now may our God make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you; and may your hearts be so strengthened in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Amen. (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13)

Prayers

God of time and eternity, heart of heaven and soul of earth, as we enter this Advent season of watching and hoping for your coming, let us not be filled with fear and foreboding but with wonder at the abiding purpose of your grace and goodness working among us.

Even as we watch history unfold: a new covid variant, extreme weather events, signs in the heavens and tumult on earth, help us to remain alert and to live into these days with your light as our guide, your love as our standard, and your hope as our inspiration.

We pray for those who travel, wherever it may be, and for whatever reason; and for all who make the pilgrimage to this city for healing. May we welcome them freely and compassionately.

Make your presence felt to the isolated and lonely: bring renewal of life and hope to those oppressed by illness or circumstances. Comfort those who mourn; remind us all that you are our ending as you were our beginning. Help us entrust the past to your mercy, the future to your wisdom, and the present to your love, for in your name we pray, Our Father and Mother