

“The Days Are Surely Coming”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
First Sunday of Advent, HOPE, December 2, 2018
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Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 33: 14-16 Luke 21: 25-36

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.”

Luke 21: 25-36

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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.”

Sermon

Recently a location scout for a major motion picture asked if we would host a film crew, whether they could park their camera and lighting equipment trucks on our parking lot, and if our fellowship hall was available for catered meals for the cast and crew?

He said that a movie scene was going to be filmed at the Dancing Goats coffee shop across the street and had observed the nearby convenience of our physical plant.

Well, we checked the church calendar,
ran the request past our church trustees and leadership team
and gave two thumbs up.

All went smoothly.
The check cleared.
Cast and crew were delighted by the commendations;
we were happy to host.
A lighting techie with tattoos and blond dreadlocks
politely requested quiet time for prayer with God in this sanctuary.
The day after they departed Decatur,
a Maid Service arrived to scour and scrub every room they used.
Nice touch.

A year later we get a call from Tammy Groves,
a former member and active Disciples pastor,
to say she saw First Christian Church in a movie theater,
and almost screamed aloud.
So, Betty and I watched the movie, called "Love, Simon".
Three-fourths of the way into the movie,
Simon is undergoing a low point in his life.
Simon is feuding with his friends;
trust has been broken;
he is lonely, upset, bereft.
His previous trips to the Dancing Goats coffee shop
had been happy gatherings with his best buddies.
Now, when he picks up some java to go,
he gets only one cup,
not the usual 3 or 4 cups for his friends.
As he pulls his car onto Ponce De Leon Avenue,
the camera pans the church on the hill,
taking in the white steeple, manicured lawn,
red brick New England architecture,
the wings of the church spread wide like the arms of Christ.
My initial reaction was,
"Oh, no! People see the Church when the film is at it's saddest."
And then my faith kicked in.
"Oh, yes! People see the Church of Jesus Christ when Simon is at his lowest."

Here we speak of hope.
Here we bear witness with hope.
Here we hold hope for one another,
for neighbors near or far, known or unknown, friend or foe.
Hope is expected, borne, carried, held here in the arms of the whole people of God.
The building reflects our ethos, our shared hope and hospitality.
When folks are at the nadir of their lives, their relationships, their meaning,

look to the Church of Jesus Christ.
The outstretched arms of Christ as seen in our architecture,
the steeple that points folks to the intangible power of God's light,
the doors that open outward to welcome home one and all,
the doors that open outward to show Christians the mission field,
the open hearts, hands, and hospitality,
all show the way of hope.

Yes, we know how to give the gift of a sweater, a book, a tie.
Here we prove we know how to give the gift of hope.

There is both a great cloud of witnesses and living souls in our midst
who embody hope and point us to the fulfillment of the promises of God.

We turn the Holy Scriptures for guidance on hopefulness,
and along the way we discover the witness of the prophets.

The Holy Scriptures are theological documentation of God's loving activity.
The Holy Bible is replete with the stories and songs,
prayers and praises of people's faith experiences.
Hannah tells how she met God in the Temple...
Peter preaches about a God who forgives...
Bartimaeus says he was blind but now he sees...
The Gerasene Demoniac shares he was lost but now is found...
Lazarus rejoices he was once dead to the world, and now he lives in Christ...
Jeremiah became a witness for hope.
From the very beginning of Jeremiah's call to follow God,
he was commissioned to keep hope alive.

Jeremiah said, *Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,*

⁵ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*

⁶ *Then I said,
"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."*

⁷ *But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.*

⁸ *Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."*

⁹ *Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth;
and the Lord said to me,
"Now I have put my words in your mouth.*

¹⁰ *See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1: 4-10)*

This was no simple summons from the Lord.

Abraham Heschel pointed out that

*“the call to be a prophet is more than an invitation.
It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, of acquiescence or willing surrender.*

*But this winsome feeling is only one aspect of the experience.
The other aspect is a sense of being ravished or carried away by violence,
of yielding to an overpowering force against one’s will.*

*The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God,
the appeal and the pressure,
the charm and the stress.*

[The prophet] is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation.” [1]

Jeremiah gave hope in a time of despair and desperation.

At some point in their lives most prophets are shunned or silenced or stoned to death.

Jeremiah’s vocation as a prophet lasted some forty years.

He understood that the Hebrews would be in Babylon for a long, long time.

He encouraged his people to work where they were planted,

and to remember from whence they came and would one day return.

So Jeremiah preached hope.

Even and especially in the midst of what seems like despair,
he trusted that God was nigh.

*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.” (Jeremiah 33: 14-16)

So, live in the present.

Be. Here. Now.

Keep hope alive.

Keep alive within you a vision for the future,

a confidence that the promise of God will be fulfilled.

No matter how desperate the times or situation,

God has not abandoned and will not abandon the people of God.

Trust in the promise – it is enough.

John Claypool tells the story of a conversation with a Jewish Rabbi,
who told him,

“The only unforgivable sin is despair, because despair denies God.”

Despair denies.

Hope affirms.

Folks, the truth is that we don't know enough
to be negative or despondent or hopeless.

Trusting in God inspired Jeremiah to purchase land in Israel
even though he was in exile,

an outward act of an inner faith

that one day the Israelites would return to their homeland,
that God would lead them home.

We, too, have an outward act of an inner faith in the return of God's people.

The birth of Jesus Christ is God's investment in the human condition.

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem and in our lives is an act of hope.

This hope has been given to you.

Mary's baby is God's yes to the world,
which includes us...

and every living soul on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

Robert Raines said,

"God speaks to us in [God's] own sign language - a baby.

Not much.

A small December child.

A baby is birth, beginnings, potential without guarantee.

A baby is helpless, but not hopeless.

A baby is someone to watch.

A baby is the future - appearing now.

Are there baby-signs from God signaling hope to us watchers on the hillsides?"

Georgia's own Pat Conroy wrote a number of fine books,

including *The Great Santini*, *Conrack*, *Prince of Tides*, and *The Losing Season*.

The late Pat Conroy told a personal story of when he was young

and his mother read bedtime stories to him and his little sister.

A memorable book she read to her children was The Diary of Anne Frank.

As Pat listened to the entries of Anne Frank's diary, he fell in love with her.

He thought, *I am so much more worthy of her than that boy she speaks of,
for I know and understand her.*

Why must she hide? Why can't she be free, she is so beautiful?

And suddenly, just like that, she was gone,
the book suddenly over, no more entries.
In 1944, the Frank family was captured and placed in concentration camps.

Mrs. Conroy closed the book and said,
*"I shared this with you because I want you children
to be the kind of people
who will hide Jews and anyone in need of protection."*

Well, the very next day there was a knock at the door
and a neighbor was there on the Conroy's doorstep.
Pat and his family knew the neighbor was Jewish;
as soon as his little sister threw open the door and saw who it was
she reached out and grabbed his hand
and exclaimed, *"I will hide you! I will hide you!"*

We will hide you.

We will hold you up.

We will help and heal and hear you,
whether you are next door,
in the next county or next country;
whether you are at our doorstep or at the border.

Whenever you feel threatened or harmed or afraid,
we will stand by you and with you and for you.

And the people will say, *"Oh, yes!*

*People! See the Church of Jesus Christ
when Simon and you and I are at our lowest. Here is hope!"*

Here people like Simon and you and me find sanctuary, safety, succor.

Here Christ offers hope. And home. And hospitality.

Here we receive Jeremiah's message of hope.

Here disciples bear witness with hope.

Here we hold hope for one another,
for neighbors near or far, known or unknown, friend or foe.

The Hope of Christ is expected, borne, carried, held here,
here in the arms of the whole people of God.

All power be to the Creator, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, Harper Press, 1962, Page 114