

“Hope” – Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

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“Happy New Year!” Say it with me, “Happy New year!” Yes, that’s right, today is new year’s day, We all knew that of course. Sing it with me: “Should Old Acquaintance be forgot...”

Yes, it’s new year’s day! A least according to our Christian Calendar--the one that everyone pays attention to. Which is why we don’t begin anything related to Christmas celebrations until December 25th and they last for 12 whole days! We mark this New Year with decorations, don’t they look great. And with candles on an advent wreath--so grateful to the youth and Ms. Kim, and all who helped set the mood.

So, yes, today, is in fact the first Sunday of the New Year according to the Christian calendar, as it is the first Sunday of Advent. But, don’t worry, you still have time to make New Year’s resolutions in anticipation of January 1st, as you observe the Roman calendar. Regarding Advent, the protestant church has not observed Advent for very long. I’d bet when this church was first organized in the 1940s they didn’t observe Advent. But, since that time, suddenly, Advent wreaths began to appear in worship services in our churches, and I’m so glad they did. We need advent.

A colleague comes from a Christian tradition that doesn’t observe Advent. He had never heard of it. He asked me, “what does it mean to you, Craig?” I was kind of caught of guard. He’s so personal in his questions. What does it mean to me? Well, Where do I begin?! It’s about the theme of *waiting* and anticipation in preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth--the miracle of incarnation--Immanuel, God with us. And, the lighting of the candles--these symbolize light overcoming the darkness.

And, the themes that we lift up each week--Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, Great words. Holy words, Advent Words.

Today’s word is Hope. Hope. A good sermon title. Another friend and colleague was talking to me about her sermon and she was going for: “Hope on the Horizon!” An even better sermon title! If only I’d of spoken with her before Donna needed a sermon title for our bulletin!

Who could use a little hope right now?

As the late singer songwriter [David Bailey](#) wrote:

“The message of hope, it never grows old.”

Let’s take a moment to talk about “hope.” Not Bob Hope. But rather, what is hope?

How many of you used hope in a sentence last week?

I hope the turkey gets done.

I hope my team wins the ball game--that’s what many of us were saying this weekend, especially on Friday evening.

I hope it snows this winter.

I hope to get some good rest.

Does that get at what hope means? It kind of just gets thrown around and used conveniently about how we can get our way. But, I think it goes deeper than that. I think hope is a lot more powerful word than talking about what we might want for supper.

I was listening to [an interview](#) with Bill Burke who founded the Optimism Institute. His podcast is called "Blue Sky" suggesting that even above dark stormy clouds are "blue skies". Burke was asked, "what's the difference between hope and optimism?"

Hope and optimism terms we use interchangeably sometimes.

We might describe people as optimists, and others as the opposite of an optimist, a pessimist.

Alright, let's survey the group gathered here. Now, raise your hand if you're an optimist?

Just kidding. And, now pessimists raise your hand? I'm just kidding!

Burke suggested that optimists assume that the odds are in their favor--"this team has a 92% chance of winning the game Friday. They have a better record, and they have home field advantage: They're pretty optimistic about their chances."

Different from that, Burke says, is that you usually have hope when the odds are not in your favor, *But*, you still think things are going to work out in your favor. "This team has an 8% chance of winning, and they're going to be playing in a hostile environment." You're hanging on with hope about their chances.

Hope. When the odds aren't in your favor, but you still see things turning out okay.

It's almost like suggesting there are realists and those who are delusional! And that people who have hope are delusional. It feels that way sometimes.

But, still. Hope is so inspiring, and hope, of course, goes well beyond sports.

From a Christian perspective, Hope is an act of faith. Paul says of the Bible: "It is written to give hope..." (Romans 15)

To get at the depth and scope of how powerful a word "hope" is, What is hope: was one of the first questions asked by our Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor, Dr. Brenda Green, as our peer learning group during my chaplain residency at the hospital. In the face of a difficult diagnosis, a poor prognosis, a tragic accident, and even death, she asked us to consider: "Now, what does hope look like?"

Today is World HIV/AIDS day. It's incredible to think where we are with this disease today. Those of us who were alive at the time likely remember how it was in the 80s when people were diagnosed, it was a death sentence. We remember the performance of Tom Hanks in "Philadelphia," and when we hear Magic Johnson had contracted the disease. Kevin, who gave me permission to share his story, was a friend of mine. Kevin was told he had HIV on Feb 21, 2003 at 2:45 pm. A moment, when time stood still and his life was changed forever. How is hope part of his story?

“There is a lot of negativity and heaviness when talking about HIV....it can be worse than you can imagine. But, I want to provide a different perspective and talk about the benefits of living with HIV. Since my diagnosis...I have seen so many positive changes. As crazy as this may sound, I have gotten to a place where I know I am lucky to be living with AIDS.” Kevin reasoned: “In the years prior to my diagnosis I was lost. I had forgotten who I was and what I wanted in life. I was adrift in a sea of my own addictions. Every day since my diagnosis, I have gained more clarity. Who I am. What I want in life. What is most important to me. What I want in a friend or a partner. My goals. My dreams. My present. My future.

That cliché of living every day like it is your last really resonates with me. If I really had just this one day to live, I would want to live it with purpose, with stability, and with passion. The small stuff, the daily drama does not get to me like it used to.

Kevin said he has grown spiritually: “During the “dark times”, as I call the 5 years before my diagnosis, I lost the faith that had held my life together. Not only did I not know who I was, but I didn't know who to ask for strength, guidance, or support. In the past seven years I have deepened my faith. In my healing process, I've come to terms with my mortality. It is a fact that I am living with AIDS and it is a fact that my body will decay and return to the earth. It is a dose of humility. I am a fleeting blink of an eye in this universe, I don't have all the answers, and I am OK with that. But, armed with this renewed connection to my spirituality, I have come to know one answer: Treat everyone better than you want to be treated. This is at the center of AIDS related stigma. And for me... a way to be closer to the divine.”

Kevin says: HIV is one of the best things that ever happened to me. My process continues to be difficult as I make choices and life decisions as a gay man with AIDS in his mid 30s. However, through my diagnosis I have become empowered. I have found a voice and a blissful urge to live.

Hope. Hope on the horizon. The message of hope, it never grows old. Week one of advent turns our attention to hope.

Who could use a little hope right now?

Look at the destruction to the earth. Look at the raging wars. Of these things, Jesus says, they are signs of your coming redemption. In other words, these are dreadful things, but to not give into despair, instead live into hope. I do find this passage from Luke confusing in many ways. Apocalyptic themes attributed to Jesus 2000 years ago are challenging to interpret.

But, here is one aspect of what he's saying that I think helps us people of faith, be a people of hope. Call it simple, but honestly, it has to do with our postures. With looking up.

What happens when we are feeling defeated? When we feel like all is lost?

When we feel defeated, when we feel like all is lost, when we feel hope has gone, we tend to look down.

Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.” It's hard to see the sun, moon and stars when we look down.

Jesus said, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;"

It's hard to see the budding fig tree and all the trees when we look down.

I'm not sure if he meant it this way or not but I like to think about this message of hope, and these passages as a commentary on our postures.

Jesus Goes on to say, don't let your hearts get weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and worries of this life. Or, as Eugene Peterson translated it, parties and drinking and shopping! Ha!

Had Jesus been preaching these days he might have added to this list of things that can weigh heavy on our hearts "doom scrolling" or the 24 hour news cycle.

Jesus saying, don't be weighted down. Stand firm and look up! In other words: Fear Not. Hope.

To look to the sun, moon, and stars is an act of resilience.

To set an eye toward the bud of a tree in the bleak midwinter is an act of resistance.

IN the midst of so much that seems to be going not as it should be, Advent gives us resources to long for and work for the world not always as it is but as God would have it.

Kim has suggested to us a resource by an organization called SALT. They pick up on the theme of star gazing as part of the journey of advent. If we want to see the stars--even if our night skies are getting more and more polluted with satellites and bright street lights--still, we have to look up.

IN their reflection for week one of Advent they say,

"When Jesus talked about "signs in the stars" many of his listeners were feeling hopeless, suffering under the mighty roman empire who had taken their land, their freedom, and their hope for the future. They longed for liberation--and so Jesus encouraged them to look up to the heavens for glimmers of hope, signs that God's creative power outshines even the most fearsome oppressor on earth."

They go on to look at some history of liberation, as they reflect: "In a similar way, hundreds of years later, enslaved people of African and Native American descent endured terrible suffering and injustice--and when they escaped, they often traveled by night, guided by the stars. Just as Jesus followers looked to the heavens for hope, these freedom fighters found solace and direction in the night sky above them."

Happy New Year! The season of Advent--a season of preparation begins. Historically, the faithful prepared during Advent by fasting--not a bad idea after heavy Thanksgiving meals!

They prepared with extended times of prayer--might that be something to consider.

Advent was a time of watching and waiting, preparing for the coming of Christ--Immanuel--God with us.

A final word--literally, as I conclude. That word is קַוָּה , kah VAH.

The final word is a hebrew word--sort of sounds like that restaurant chain: Cava. kah VAH. say it with me: kah VAH.

We find that word, in Psalm 25 which is the Psalm that is part of today's lectionary reading:

Psalm 25: 55 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Where it says "Wait" that is the word, kah VAH. Which is also translated in other versions of the bible as - hope in the Lord.

The Hebrew verb "qavah" primarily conveys the idea of waiting with anticipation or hope. It is often used in the context of looking forward to something with eager expectation. This waiting is not passive but involves a confident expectation of God's intervention or fulfillment of His promises. The term can also imply a sense of gathering or binding together, as in the intertwining of strands to form a cord, symbolizing strength and unity."

Hope. Hope on the horizon.

"The message of Hope it never grows old," wrote singer songwriter David Bailey after he was diagnosed with brain cancer:

"It's the greatest story that ever was told

It's the green in the grass and the blue in the sky

It's the reason we have the courage to try

The message of hope never grows old

It makes the weak strong and turns the meek bold

It's the way that the world was meant to unfold."

Jesus says, look up: ***"I am coming."*** May our gracious God give us the perspective to see the meaning of the season and strength to keep a holy Advent. Amen.