

## Embrace Hope

When you are confused. When your world falls apart. When you're forced out of your comfort zone. When you are separated from the ones you love. When your faith is challenged. When you are scared. When everything seems out of control. How do you embrace hope?

Hope is the theme for the first Sunday of Advent. Hope is hard to define. It's different than wishful thinking. It's different than being confident in your own abilities. It's different than refusing to face reality.

Hope is knowing that God is bigger than anything we fear, bigger than anything that is going wrong. Hope is trusting that God is present and, ultimately, things will get better.

Embracing hope means living in a way that is right and shows love. Embracing hope means throwing ourselves into God's story and onto God's promises and living as if God's kingdom is already present in our world.

Our Scripture texts from Jeremiah, Psalms, Thessalonians, and Luke speak of this hope in terms of waiting for or anticipating some future action of God. At the same time, they acknowledge the turbulence of past, present, and future events. The Scripture texts describe this future action of God in the language of righteousness, justice, and steadfast love—dimensions of God's goodness being revealed one day in all its fullness.<sup>1</sup> We read these same scriptures every three years. Much of what I have to say about them is what I've said to you before. And that's a good thing. Repetition helps us remember. Remembering God's story, the stories of God's people, and our stories helps us to embrace hope.

The reading from Jeremiah announces that the ancient promise of a messiah, a savior, who is a descendent of King David will be fulfilled and Jerusalem will be secure.

Here are the words of Jeremiah: <sup>14</sup>*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. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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."*<sup>2</sup>

These verses are part of a series of sermons announcing salvation for Judah and Israel. The prophet encourages the people by promising that their hopes will one day be fulfilled. The line of kings descended from David will be extended. The people of God will live in peace and security. Justice and righteousness will prevail.

When Jeremiah speaks to the people, he is offering a message of hope at a time of great turmoil, a time when people fear for what the future will bring. When he shares the prophecy that God will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line, he is assuring the people that a Messiah will come, and that through this Messiah they will know the righteousness of the Lord.

Righteousness is a word used regularly throughout the Bible. It is a characteristic of God, which God gives *to* us and, in the case of passages such as Jeremiah 33, is *for* us. When we say that God is our righteousness, we mean that God is the ultimate example of what *good* looks and acts like. We display righteousness by acting according to God's purposes. God's purposes include love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws from Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 1-6; Pulpit Fiction, Advent 1C, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/advent1c>; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 13-15; *Leader, Fall 2018*, MennoMedia, pp. 39-40; and *Leader, Fall 2021*, MennoMedia, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 33:14-16, *New Revised Standard Version*.

Righteousness is often paired with justice. The people of God experienced times of pain and oppression as well as times of richness and abundance. Throughout these stories, especially in the hard times, the people cried out for God's righteousness *and* justice. But they weren't always so eager to demonstrate justice. God's justice includes fair and equitable relationships among people, impartial law courts, and the protection of the weak from the strong. Righteousness refers to the personal characteristics that make the conditions for justice possible.

What we declare that the Lord is our righteousness...and our justice, we are saying that God is our measuring stick, the one to whom we look for instruction and guidance on how to live. We measure ourselves against the words of God. God, who declares equal rights for all people – citizens and aliens. God, who chooses to die rather than resort to violent retribution. God, who tells us to love those who revile, persecute and hate us. God, who tells us that to be rich, we must first become poor. God, who tells us that to be first we must become last.

The people who first heard these words through Jeremiah were reassured of God's promise of restoration after a time of barrenness and defeat. Even as they lived in turmoil and fear, Jeremiah encouraged them to embrace hope. He encouraged them to act according to God's purposes and to demonstrate God's justice.

How have you experienced barrenness or defeat? How has our congregation? During a year of disruption, we found ways to remain connected. We created a new way to worship together – in-person with a Zoom connection. In some ways, our current return to Zoom only feels like a barren time. Perhaps this time of waiting for the completion of our renovation project helps us to better identify with Jeremiah's listeners and with all who waited in expectation for the Branch from David's root.

Jeremiah promises that God's righteousness and justice will be revealed through God's righteous Messiah. Reading this passage gives us a chance to reimagine the world as one of justice and peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, love and grace. We look for signs in our time and lives that God remains faithful to this promise. We participate in God's restorative action. We embrace hope.

Psalm 25 is a prayer for help and forgiveness. It reaffirms the righteousness and faithfulness of God already expressed in the reading from Jeremiah. The psalmist turns to God for assurance, guidance and deliverance.

Read this psalm.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.*

<sup>2</sup>*O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.*

<sup>3</sup>*Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

<sup>4</sup>*Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.*

<sup>5</sup>*Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.*

<sup>6</sup>*Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.*

<sup>7</sup>*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!*

<sup>8</sup>*Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.*

<sup>9</sup>*He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.*

<sup>10</sup>*All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 25:1-10, *New Revised Standard Version*.

There are two important verbs in these verses, wait and remember. These are two of the basic activities or attitudes of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting, of expectation, of looking to the future; but it is also a time for remembrance, for recollection, for reflection.

In verse 3 of the psalm, the word wait appears in a prayer. This is a prayer of intercession, a petition on behalf of a group. In verse 5, it appears in a statement of confession, an expression of trust. Intercession and confession may be seen as two ways of waiting. Waiting can be tranquil and restful, however, it often includes some turbulence and confusion, some misery and trouble.

If we read on in Psalm 25 to verses 16-19, we find a list of problems including loneliness, pain, troubles and problems, suffering, sins, enemies, and hatred. The psalmist waits for God when all the evidence suggests that waiting may be long and the pain and misery deep. The goal of waiting, however, is not simply to endure it all. A list of hopeful requests counterbalances the terms depicting misery. The requests from verses 16-19 include turn to me, have mercy on me, free me, look at me, forgive me. And from the first 10 verses: lead me, teach me, protect me, do not let me be put to shame. That's quite a list of Christmas requests. But that is part of what Advent and redemption are all about—recognizing and confessing the nature of the way things are now and wanting and requesting a new way of being.”

The psalmist also talks about remembering. This takes two forms: remembering and remembering not. A kind of naughty and nice list. Please remember this; please don't remember that. It's not surprising to note that the nice list consists of the qualities of God; the naughty list consists of human shortcomings.

The psalmist requests that God remember mercy and steadfast love, those divine qualities that move God toward human redemption. On the other hand, the psalmist requests that God remember not – that is, forget – the human past with its youthful sins (inadvertent errors and wayward faults) and more adult transgressions (more deliberate and premeditated wrongs.)

In Psalm 25, experiencing God's steadfast love leads to learning and walking in God's way of truth and righteousness. How have you experienced God's steadfast love? How has our congregation? One way I experience God's steadfast love is through this congregation. In spite of my shortcomings as a pastor and as a person, you continue to offer your support and love to me. I felt this in tangible ways during my cancer treatment and the death of my mother. You have helped me to embrace hope. My prayer is that you have experienced this as well.

If you are looking for hope and support, you probably would be more likely to turn to Psalm 25 than to Luke 21. Advent always begins with a Gospel reading from the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus. Apocalyptic scriptures feature symbolic forms or visions that uncover, reveal, or point toward the future. They are marked by descriptions of the end of the world and the theme of judgment. These texts impress upon us that the coming of the Messiah includes much more than the Christmas story about a baby in a manger. They confirm to us that Advent is of such significance that the entire cosmos reverberates with the signs and circumstances of these events.

Hear the words from Luke 21. <sup>4</sup> <sup>25</sup> *“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. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

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

<sup>34</sup> *“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, <sup>35</sup> like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> 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.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 21:25-36, *New Revised Standard Version.*

This passage contains part of Jesus' answer to two questions found earlier in the chapter: *Teacher, the disciples asked, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' response – beginning with verse 8 and concluding with the passage we just heard – includes a sequence of events. Most are quite turbulent; others are encouraging and a source of hope. Wars, earthquakes, famines, plagues, terrible sights and great signs from heaven – turbulence. Do not be terrified – encouragement. Arrest and persecution – turbulence. Opportunities to testify and the promise of irresistible words and irrefutable wisdom – encouragement. Betrayal and hatred, maybe even death – turbulence. Life and salvation – encouragement. Destruction of Jerusalem, distress & wrath – turbulence. Ability to see the signs and flee – encouragement. Signs in the sky, distress on the earth, the Son of man coming with power and glory – turbulence for many people; – encouragement for the faithful.

Verse 28 assures the followers of Christ that, for them, the final shaking of heaven and earth will not be an occasion for fear and distress. On the contrary, the day of judgment is the day of grace. In verses 29-33, Jesus assures his followers that the kingdom of God is near and that his word will never pass away. They can count on what he says.

Verses 34-36 contain an admonition. Grace does not mean an automatic exemption from the distress coming upon all peoples of the earth. Rather, let this word about what will be have a sanctifying influence. Let it bring you closer to God. Let it produce a prayerful watchfulness. Let it free you from indulgence and anxiety about things.

In Luke 21, Jesus calls on his disciples to watch and wait for the fullness of God's kingdom, for redemption to come. This future revelation of God's goodness brings with it some foreboding; God's goodness brings judgment on all that is not good, all that brings injustice and unrighteousness. What does this double-edged goodness of God look like in your life, in our church, in our community, bringing redemption for the lowly faithful but judgment for the powerful abusers? While these words may be unsettling, they can also help us to embrace hope – if we are acting according to God's purposes and demonstrating God's justice.

During Advent, we look both at the past and at the future. We remember and remember not. We recall those eternal characteristics of goodness attributed to God. At the same time, we release the past with its accumulated failures.

During Advent, we wait. We wait, trusting that God's promises will be fulfilled, even if it's not on our timetable. We wait, embracing hope, living in a way that is right and shows love.

First Thessalonians 3 includes a prayer of benediction for God to increase the believers' love for one another and for all, and to strengthen their hearts in holiness.

Receive this prayer.<sup>6</sup> *9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.*

*11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Can we, dare we, embrace hope? We can when we remember God's steadfast goodness and the goodness of learning and walking in God's ways. We can when we abound in love for one another and for all. We can when we throw ourselves into God's story and onto God's promises and live as if God's kingdom is already present in our world.

And so we pray: Come now, O Prince of Peace; come now, O God of love; make us one body. Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile your people. Come, O Lord Jesus, reconcile all nations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 21:7.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>7</sup> *Osoo (Come Now, O Prince of Peace)*, ©2012 Geonyong Lee, *Voices Together Hymnal* #391.