

“TIME TO GO HOME”

Rev. Victor Kim

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

(11-28-21) Advent 1

I want to begin by acknowledging that the title of our Advent sermon series, Homecoming, is inspired by the theme of the Advent Candle Lighting liturgies of the United Methodist Church. It's funny that while I'm borrowing the theme from the UMC candle lighting liturgy, we are not using their liturgy, but rather our own liturgy from PWS&D.

Well, it is Advent, the beginning of a new church year. Why does the new church year begin with Advent and not the first Sunday in January? Because Advent is the journey of the four Sundays before Christmas and Christmas, as we all know, is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It really marks the beginning of something new, the intervention of God into human existence as one of us, as Emmanuel, God with us. So the Advent journey is a journey of homecoming, a journey to the manger, to the stable, to the place where God is born in our midst.

It may be that we need a sense of homecoming, maybe this year, more than anytime in living memory. Omicron. It's the 15th letter of the Greek alphabet, but we now know it as the most recent variant of the coronavirus, Covid-19. We don't know too much about it yet, but what we do know sounds ominous. By March of next year, only 4 months away now, it will be 2 full years of the global pandemic that has changed everything.

What seems clear to us now is that indeed, this pandemic is truly global. The Omicron variant seems to have originated in South Africa but it has already shut down travel from the southern part of that continent to most of the rest of the world, including Canada. But the variant has already spread to places like Israel, Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. It seems just a matter of time before we hear that it's here as well. It's so obvious that if we don't get vaccines to the rest of the world, in Africa for example, only 10% of the population has received even one dose of a vaccine, if we don't get the rest of the world vaccinated, it won't matter that much that Canada is closer to 80% fully vaccinated. Love your neighbour as you love yourself takes on a new meaning when it comes to making sure that everyone gets access to the vaccine.

Then on top of the pandemic, we here in B.C. who live in a part of the world renowned for its natural beauty, also have a front row seat to the reality of climate change. Atmospheric rivers, a term most people wouldn't have heard until recently, seem to be lining up, one after another, to drop unimaginable amounts of precipitation on our province. The damage has been horrific and sadly, will probably get worse. Some people call it a climate disaster or climate catastrophe but the semantics don't matter as much as the reality of it all.

And as I have said before, no matter what you believe about the human impact on climate change, we can't just keep doing the same thing, the cost is just too high.

Things seem pretty dire at the moment. Hope seems hard to come by. Hope, isn't that supposed to be the focus of the first Sunday in Advent? Where do we find hope in the midst of all the chaos around us? Chaos, that's an apt word for us as we begin this Advent journey. Yesterday at the Center for Missional Leadership course that a number of us in the congregation are taking through St. Andrew's Hall, we heard Dr. Barbara Mutch speak to us about spirituality in times of transition and loss. Dr. Mutch spoke about times in her life when loss led to a sense of chaos. She reminded us that the creation story in the Bible, in the book of Genesis, tells us that in the beginning, when God created, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. The Message translation says that earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness, a watery abyss. It was chaos, disorder. And out of that chaos, out of that disorder, out of that bottomless emptiness, God spoke and goodness appeared. This is what God does. God creates goodness out of chaos, order out of disorder.

The Israelites to whom the prophet Jeremiah spoke would have been intimately familiar with a sense of chaos. The land had been conquered by the Babylonians and the people had been carried off into exile. Their lives were disordered, chaotic, unconnected to any sense of home. The questions they would have asked might seem familiar to us. Where is God in the midst of this? Why did this devastation happen? Can God be trusted to act?

And yet in the midst of this disorder comes the assurance of God. ***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."*** Something new is promised and that promise is grounded in the righteousness of the Lord, the righteousness of God. God promised a way home for God's people. Even in the midst of exile, even in deep disorder and chaos, God speaks and goodness comes. The promise of God will bring the people home, a home where there will be justice and righteousness in the land. Hope is the promise that God creates good out of chaos, that God acts when all hope seems lost.

I've been thinking a lot about words recently. We say a lot of things but what do our words mean if they're only words? This Thursday I was at the worship of the Vancouver School of Theology community and I heard Dr. Ray Aldred preach. His sermon was called, "Do not Steal." As the Director of the Indigenous Studies program at VST, Ray's words carried a particular force. He talked about how people steal things that are not theirs to take, like land.

He preached about how people have taken without giving thanks, which is stealing. And as his sermon drew to a close, Ray asked, “**so what are we going to do about it?**” Words are important, but at some point we have to move from just saying to doing. There was an awkward silence, but then people started to speak. Someone said that they would commit to learning more, commit to making relationships. One woman said that her church has made a commitment to giving an amount of money annually to their local Indigenous community as a gesture of reparation and reconciliation. Words must lead to actions.

God makes promises but God keeps God’s promises. God’s word creates goodness, leads us towards home. God kept the promise God made to the Israelites, that a righteous Branch will spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. For Christians that promise was kept in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus, the righteous Branch from the line of David.

Jesus is the source of our hope in a chaotic world. The gospel reading from Luke paints a picture of an ending and it is apocalyptic. ***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.***

People think that the word apocalypse means destruction or disaster, but really it means a disclosure, an uncovering, a revelation. What the gospel tells us is that the coming chaos, the distress among the confused nations, the fainting of people from fear and foreboding, isn’t about a disaster or destruction, but actually about a revealing. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

But if the **coming** of Jesus is an apocalypse, the **birth** of Jesus is also an apocalypse. It is God’s revelation of God’s very self that will change everything, that will reveal a new world order. We can hear the gospel reading for today and hear our own lives in the words. Distress from the roaring of the sea and the waves. Fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. We can fear, we can be distressed, we can pray for deliverance, we can choose to close our eyes to it all or just hope that everything will return to the way it was soon. *But Jesus doesn’t speak of escapism or complacency. No misinterpreted apocalypticism that relies on our rapture; a kind of utopia or going back to normal. Rather Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse utters truth. That when God reveals God’s self, the world will never be the same. That when our world, our lives, our churches, seem to be breaking apart, to be ending, that is exactly when we can expect God’s revelation – God at God’s apocalyptic best.*¹

¹ Karoline Lewis, Working Preacher, **An Apocalyptic Advent**, November 22, 2021

God at God's apocalyptic best. Now that's a different kind of hope than what we're used to. Hope for the world is an end to the pandemic. Hope is believing that somehow, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the nations of the world will act together to keep the world's climate to less than a 1.5° celsius rise in temperature. Hope for the world might look like a bit more for the poorest and a smidgen less for the 1%. But we know that this kind of hope is only temporary. The next pandemic will come and the climate will continue to change. There will continue to be floods and earthquakes, wars, famine, inequality, oppression, hate.

What's needed is an altogether different hope, God at God's apocalyptic best. What's needed is the hope revealed in Jesus that God is here, has been, and always will be, that the powers that appear to be in control are not the powers that control who we are and how we choose to be in the world, that our witness matters to God's activity in the world – but that it will come at a price. What's needed is the hope that Jesus reveals, that there is a kind of power that will never be coercive or manipulative, that seeks out the lost and liberates the bound, that regards the lowly and lifts up the overlooked and that believes in salvation for all flesh. But the worlds that depend on a certain kind of hope, on certain powers and privilege, are not prone to entertaining alternative views of authority. Karoline Lewis writes, the birth we anticipate will bring with it deaths we have to accept.²

It's time to go home. As we begin our Advent journey to the manger, to the stable, to the Christ Child, we recognize that our hope has to begin with God, the righteousness of the Lord. ***Either this birth means everything, or it means nothing.*** This birth is the birth of a hope that in the face of the distress, fear and foreboding, will find strength to not only endure, but to raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

I don't know when that day will be, no one does and anyone who says they do is lying. But until that day comes, we must live as a people of God's apocalyptic hope. We must live as a people of God's righteousness, who do more than just talk a good faith game, but live it out. We get to control who we are and how we choose to be in the world. There's a reason we're here together this morning on this first Sunday in Advent, together in this place or together bound by the Spirit wherever we may be. It's because even though we trust the science and act to keep each other safe, even though we commit to a way of living that respects God's entrusting of creation to us as God's stewards, we know that what will ultimately save us is a child, God with us, Emmanuel. It's time to go home.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

² Ibid