

“ADVENT HOPE”
By Rev. Victor Kim
Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44
(12-01-19) Advent 1

As we begin this season of Advent, I will begin each Sunday with a story from the news that concerns our theme. On this the first Sunday of Advent, our theme is hope. The opposite of hope is despair. I want to begin by reading from the Vancouver Sun this week a story of despair so that by the end of this sermon we might also understand how we can be a people of hope as an Advent people.

Final numbers from the 2019 Vancouver homeless count were released this week and advocates say they again prove the urgent need for more social housing and welfare rates high enough to cover basic rent in the city. The figures didn't change much from a preliminary report released in June. Volunteers counted 2,223 homeless people in the city, up two per cent from 2,181 last year. It was the highest number since 2005, when the count was first done.

Surveys revealed that 23 per cent were women and girls, and seven per cent were under 25 years of age. Most were sick and most lost their homes in Vancouver. Sixty per cent were experiencing two or more health problems, up from 54 per cent in 2018. Eighty-one per cent were already living in the city when they became homeless.

Celine Mauboules, the city's director of homelessness services, said she was particularly troubled to learn that the homeless population is aging.

Twenty-three per cent of respondents were 55 years or older, up from 21 per cent last year. Shelter providers meet seniors living on small incomes and pensions, and unable to keep up with rising rents, Mauboules said. With vacancy rates near zero, upon losing their housing, they are unable to find affordable units elsewhere and turn to the street. Some lose their housing during long hospital stays, she added. “They just don’t have any other options,” Mauboules said. “We hear these stories from seniors who are falling through the cracks of our systems of care, and are really being priced out of the housing market based on their limited income.”

Jeremy Hunka, spokesman for Union Gospel Mission, said the rising number of homeless seniors was a top concern for his non-profit, too. “Senior guests are also much more vulnerable to extreme cold and being taken advantage of, mistreated, or even robbed when they are alone outside, so this steady increase is definitely concerning.”

Coun. Jean Swanson, a long time poverty fighter elected in 2018, said many of the figures in the counts have been consistent over the years, and government should be acting on what it has long known. “It’s so frustrating to be always counting and not building housing,” she said. “I disagree with the premise that it’s so complex. I think we do need to do the counts but it’s almost as if the purpose of them is to say that the problem is these people have mental health issues or they have addictions, when the problem is that they don’t have housing.” Swanson wants the provincial government to build more modular housing and raise income-assistance rates to be commensurate with the cost of living in the city.

“Those things have to be changed, we can’t let up on them,” she said.

Mauboules agreed with Swanson that building more social housing and raising income-assistance rates are key to reducing homelessness.

I want us to remember what the article has said as we now move on with the sermon because we will come back to it before we finish. Advent is the beginning of the new church year. It’s a time of newness and hope, anticipation and expectancy. It’s closely associated with Christmas and the joy of the birth of Jesus. But Advent always starts with an ending, the prophecy of the end of the world. This year we read from Matthew’s gospel that when the end comes, two will be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together, one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming, says Matthew. As much as we have associated Advent with Christmas and the birth of Jesus, Advent is really more about the return of Jesus and that return will signify the end of the world as we have known it.

This past Friday I was in Calgary on Black Friday. You know what that is. I spent part of Black Friday at a shopping mall, big mistake, but my little niece wanted to go and I couldn’t say no. Lots of Black Friday sales, I’m sure it was the same here. Big markdowns, some were for clearance sales, other for moving sales, some were for even the close of business sales. But I’ve never seen an end of the world sale. The discounts for that would be something to see!

Advent begins with the end of the world, but I think we have too often focused on the wrong aspect of the end of the world. Two are in the field, one is taken, one is left behind. Two women are grinding meal, one is taken, one left behind, and so on. We read about how people were eating, drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be coming of the Son of Man. We read passages like this and we get caught up in the fear that these passages can elicit in us. We don't want to be the one left behind when the other is taken up. We don't want to be the ones outside the ark when the flood starts. Passages like this on the end of the world have spawned countless books on the apocalypse and huge bestsellers like the Left Behind series of books.

But I think we get the essential focus wrong. The end of the world is not something we ought to be fearing, but something we should be welcoming, because if this world comes to an end, it means one thing, that Jesus has returned. It means that Jesus has returned to bring history as we have known it to a close, not just to a close, but to his close, to his end, to an end which is about the full renewal and restoration of creation, the completion of what God started. The end of the world, for the Christian, is a time of hope, of joy, it's a time for celebration. It means Jesus is coming. This is what we pray for, come, Lord Jesus. We pray this every week when we pray together the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. When God's kingdom comes, it will be a time for hope and joy, celebration and thanksgiving. We are not to fear the return of the Lord, we are to be ready, we are to be prepared.

The end should give us hope because we live in a time when hope is desperately needed. We live in a world in need of hope. I could give you many examples, but we read the example in the Sun this week. More homeless than ever before in Vancouver. More seniors homeless, more people vulnerable. Despite all the glitz of the season, all the holiday cheer and festivities, too many are left out or left without much at all. And this in a country which is the envy of most of the world. What about those countries that don't know the blessings we know? How many in those countries suffer from a lack of hope?

Now imagine the context of our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. Imagine how the people of Israel must have felt, in exile, in bondage, having faced threats, destruction and deportation by one empire after another. And yet in the reading from Isaiah this first Sunday in Advent, we read, not of hopelessness, but of a promise, of a time to come when the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and all nations shall stream to it. It speaks of a time when many peoples will come to God's mountain together, to be taught by God to walk in God's ways. In that time the nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Advent speaks of hope in the midst of despair. The promise is of a time when Jesus will return, to restore things to the way God has always imagined and intended. A time when there will be no more war, when swords and spears are repurposed as agricultural implements. The promise of Advent hope is that God will do something about the suffering, the longing, the despair, that God will bring

hope. But hope isn't only just waiting for God to do something. Advent hope is also about us doing something while we wait for God to bring God's creation to God's desired ending.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Yes, God will finish what God has started, but in the meantime, in between the first and second Advent of Jesus, we have been invited, encourage and equipped by God to also be agents and ambassadors of God's promised hope. We have been invited to participate in bringing that beautiful dream of God to reality. We are invited to walk in the light of the Lord.

Think of the most hopeful thing you've ever imagined. Now if your hope became reality, did it become so just because you thought it? No, it needed action, alongside the imagination. I remember back in seminary in Toronto, I knew a guy named Peter. Peter was a Korean student studying for the ministry. He was an interesting guy, a tall, large man, somewhat unusual for a Korean. He was also somewhat privileged, he came from a wealthy family and he was able to skip the compulsory military service because he was too heavy. While in seminary, he fell in love with a visiting Korean musician. She was a famous Korean gospel singer. Not only was she talented, she was also quite beautiful. What I'm trying to make clear is that she was way out of Peter's league. Because she came to Toronto a few times and we got to know each other somewhat well, she confided in me one day, you know Peter is trying to date me but I'm not interested. She said, I think that you should be attracted to someone if you want to date them.

I'm not really attracted to Peter, in fact, I try to be attracted to him but it isn't working. I felt sorry for Peter, but he's not the kind of man who takes no for an answer easily. Over the next couple of years, Peter constantly contacted the singer, racking up incredible phone bills, remember this was before the time of the internet, you actually had to pay for things like international phone calls. He told me, Victor, there's an old Korean saying, even a big tree falls after a thousand chops of the axe. If nothing else, Peter was persistent. He didn't just hope he could date someone like this singer, he did something about it. A couple of years after that Sophie and I attended their wedding service in one of the biggest Presbyterian churches in Korea.

Things don't happen only because we imagine it, what we imagine becomes reality as we work to make it happen, as we commit to it. And here's the hardest part of Advent hope for us. The hope of Isaiah's vision is undeniable. The hope of a world in which swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, where nations will not learn war anymore sound incredible, but it requires work on our parts, it won't happen just because we read Isaiah together, we need to walk in the light of the Lord, we need to act with faithfulness.

What God wants to do, what God will do, God wants to do with us playing a part. And for those of us who live in our context, as relatively affluent citizens of a wonderful country, it means that what God wants to do to bring hope may put at risk things that are precious to us, things that we value most, that we are reluctant to lose, and even more reluctant to share.¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Texts for Preaching, Year A

Now we may not be risking things on a global scale, most of us aren't wealthy enough or powerful enough or connected enough to make that level of difference. But we each have little investments, small things, important enough to us that we want to protect. What are those little investments we so jealously protect?

Think back to the article on homelessness. One of the people interviewed, Jean Swanson, says that the problem of homelessness isn't as complicated as we have made it out to be. We do these counts and the problems seem overwhelming. There are growing numbers, probably a lot of mental health issues, increasing disparity in economic wealth and it probably won't decrease anytime soon. We can let these issues overwhelm us into inaction, or we can start to do what we need to do, which is to build homes for those who are homeless. We need to provide more modular housing and raise the income assistance rates so that people who are homeless have the best opportunity to get back on their feet.

But these solutions face huge hurdles. Some of the highest of those hurdles are the attitudes and resistance of people like you and me, people who think that our hard earned money shouldn't be even more taxed only to be used on people who don't want to work, who are lazy and addicted, who are dangerous and disorderly in their conduct. And we don't want those modular homes to be built near where we live because we think it lowers property values and what good is increasing assistance rates for people when all they'll do is use it on more drugs or alcohol?

There are solutions but they require some sacrifice on our part. They require a change in heart, a repentance, in us, in our thinking, in our assumptions, in our stereotyping and judging of others. It requires us to let go of some of those things we hold on to. We want to protect our way of life, our level of comfort, our peace of mind. But sometimes Advent hope requires more of us than just good wishes, it requires our commitment to be part of the future God has promised. It requires us to walk in the light of the Lord.

- How will we do that this Advent?
- How will we be part of the future God is unfolding?
- How will we be part of the hope God is bringing in a world too familiar with despair?

We can begin in small ways by voting for the kind of leaders who will take issues like homelessness seriously, not only give lip service, but who will take action to make a concrete difference in the lives of the most vulnerable in our midst. We can begin by paying closer attention to the people in our own midst, those who are hurting with issues of grief, loss, discouragement and fear and by walking with them, bring hope from despair, light from darkness. We need to walk in the light of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

We need to remember Jesus is coming again. When? No one knows for sure, but the promise of hope is that he is coming again. That's what the table is about. We come to this communion table, hearing again the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, who instructed us to observe this sacrament in remembrance of him, but also in the expectation that we will share it anew with him in his Father's kingdom.

The Apostle Paul understands the promise of that kingdom when he says that by the eating of the bread and the drinking of wine we show the Lord's death until he comes again. Jesus is coming. I don't know when and it doesn't matter when, what matters is that he will come again. If we believe that, then let us live without fear or anxiety, but with hope and expectation, walking in the light of the Lord.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

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