

Sunday Sermon
December 2, 2018
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36
“Hopeful Signs?”

Introduction

The Lord God told Jeremiah, “Jeremiah, I want you to take my word to the people and tell them what I want them to know.”

And Jeremiah said, “No, God, I do not want to do that.”

And God said, “But Jeremiah, you are my mouthpiece. You are the one to take my message to the people.”

And Jeremiah said, “No, if I do that, they will get mad at me. If I tell them what you want me to say, they will get angry with me.”

And God said, “But I want you to go.”

And Jeremiah said, “Well, if I go, they might put me in a pit.”

And God said, “But Jeremiah, I want you to go.”

And Jeremiah said, “But if I go, they might even try to kill me, because they are not going to like hearing what you are telling me to say.”

And God said, “Jeremiah, go.”

And so by the time we get to the passage we read today, guess where Jeremiah is. He is down in a pit. And the people are looking down at him, jeering.

And Jeremiah says, “I knew this would happen. I knew if I went and told the people what you wanted them to hear, they would get mad at me and not you.”

Then Jeremiah says, “It would have been better if I had never been born than to end up like this.”

What an utterly hopeless thing to say, hopeless way to feel.

And God says, “The time is coming, Jeremiah, when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and the families of Judah. When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the tree of David. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right.

The motto for your city is going to be, “GOD Has Set Things Right for Us.”

I

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus is talking to the disciples. He is saying that they ought to be the kind of people who look at signs and see what is about to happen. Only, the disciples are a bit like the people with Jeremiah, they are not sure they want to see what the Lord is telling them.

So Jesus gives an illustration. “Look at a fig tree. As soon as it sprouts leaves you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these other things

taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” But what does that mean? Does that bring hope or despair?

Tradition goes at the University of the West Indies that the Poui tree is a symbol of either hope or despair for students studying for their final exams. If the Poui tree begins to blossom before a student has started to study, they say, there is still some hope for the student. But if the golden blossoms start to drop off the tree and still there has been no studying, that student is facing certain despair.

Look at the tree in our midst. When it sprouts little white lights and white beaded ornaments, you can know that Christmas is drawing near. How does that make us feel this morning, hopeful or despairing?

II

This is the season of the eschatos, “the last things.” It is the coming of winter death in nature and the ending of another calendar year. Yet it is also the beginning of the church year and a time of birth at Bethlehem.

So we do not know whether to call this an ending or a beginning. Because it feels like both, as if something old is dying, and something new is being born.

Do you know why throughout time people have brought greenery into their homes when the days are at their darkest and the world out there seemed to be dying? It is to have a sign of hope, that life will indeed return to the earth. So on this Sunday of celebrating hope we brought the tree into our worship.

It has been observed that when it comes to this event called Christmas, it is the anticipation, the preparation, the expectation, the hope around it that make it special. That is what God is saying to Jeremiah: Find hope in the anticipation, the expectation of the One who is to come.

That is what the writer of Luke is saying with these strange words from Jesus. It will seem like all hope is lost. A Chicken Little picture that the sky is falling: sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar. Everyone in a panic, the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

“But when all these things start to happen, get up on your feet,” Jesus says, “Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way. The Son of Man, the Messiah, is coming in glory and power.”

III

God is coming among us. Whether you hear that as good news or bad news depends to a great extent on how you happen to be standing when you hear it.

It is bad news if you are weighted down with excess, indulgence, and the worries of this world. But it is good news if you are standing on tiptoes, ready and waiting for nothing less than your redemption. It all depends on how you are standing.

“Do not let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by what is going on around you,” Jesus says. My husband and I stopped in the midst of Advent planning to make plans for Christmas, what to do for our children and grandchildren. Then we got to thinking: If we are spending money to help our family have a good Christmas, should we not do something for others who may not have that? Perhaps people who do not have warm clothes? Or children who cannot be with family and need comfort and a safe place to stay? Should we not be those who share signs of hope?

Few people were looking up that night in Bethlehem when a star of hope shone overhead. They were too busy going about their lives, talking about what was happening in the weather, talking about the government and about the injustice of having to register for taxes.

Meanwhile God was doing a great work right in their midst. It is not likely we will see God’s work in our world and in our lives this Advent if we are not looking and watching for signs.

Conclusion

You came to church today to get help to make it through the season, guidance for a better holiday. And you got a bare tree and scripture about a righteous branch springing up and a fig tree sprouting. You got signs in the sun, the moon, the stars and roaring seas and shaking heavens.

What does it mean? There are signs of hope in all kinds of things around you. God in Christ is coming anew into the world.

In think my favorite sign this week came in a Christmas letter from Buck and Margaret Walters. Buck wrote, “My year has been medically challenging, but spiritually fulfilling. God has lifted me up and steadies me on the uneven road of recovery. We none know the days accorded us. So given that, I fish every chance I get.”

People around us are covering their heads, scared of what may be falling from the skies. And God is saying up, “Heads up.” Open your eyes, stand up and look. Your redemption is drawing near. You will find signs of hope, even if you are on an uneven road.

You see, it is indeed a time of both ending and beginning. Something old is dying. Something new is being born in you.

Watch for the signs. Amen.