

Today we begin our Advent Journey towards the birth of Christ. We mark time as we light the Advent wreath in worship each Sunday. The children and families are reminded to pick up your Advent calendar in the Arcade/hallway outside today. This year we will remember that we are following a star just as the shepherds and wise men did in order to get to Bethlehem. In the darkness we need a light to guide us. So in these coming weeks we will be star followers, following the star towards Bethlehem. Some of you may know there is a new Star Wars movie coming out December 18. I know a few folks counting down the days to that movie. Some of you may have picked up on the sermon title today, the first Star Wars title. We are following a star this season, trusting in the hope that is ours through Jesus the Christ. Listen now for a word from the Lord from the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

33:14 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.

33:15 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.

33:16 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."

Luke 21:25-36

21:25 "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.

21:26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

21:27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

21:28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

21:29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;

21:30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.

21:31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

21:32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.

21:33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

21:34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,

21:35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

21:36 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."

Proclamation of the Word

Most of life is lived in between, in between significant events and moments. Now that Thanksgiving has passed, we are busily getting ready for Christmas. Public life is measured in football championships, exam weeks, or election days. Think about all the time preparing for such events. Some things like Presidential elections can seem like an eternity. Much of our personal lives are lived in between births,

the first day of school, a driver's license, a graduation, a first real job, maybe marriage, then children, retirement, death. These significant life events are things we look forward to or sometimes dread. So much of our life is about getting ready and preparing for the next big thing.

Right now we are preparing for Christmas, shopping or making gifts, mailing our cards, planning our get-togethers. But Advent will not let us get too far ahead of ourselves. Even though the Christmas music has been playing for weeks, we pause as a church to ponder the meaning of it all today in these Advent moments.

For Christians, we live in between the two most important moments in history, the first coming of Jesus Christ, and His Second Coming at the end of time. Of course, we celebrate the first coming of Jesus at Christmas with His birth. His Second Coming is less understood, mysterious. Some pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" and others add "Come, Lord Jesus...now, save us from ourselves" for the world seems to have gone mad, violent, frightening. Some expect a frightening apocalypse in the end. Perhaps you like I read the *Left Behind* Book Series. These novels written in the 1990s, the first called *This Present Darkness*, were filled with angels and demons, a scary tale of the Second Coming. The apocalyptic movie came later. But for Christians who trust and believe in the almighty God, we have hope. Not that there will be no trials, no troubles, but we know God is working towards redemption. Christ will reign, all will be well. Since the God we know in Jesus Christ comes for the salvation of humans and all creation, then why would God act any differently in the end of all times? Have you considered this?

Today's gospel reading from Luke is about such end times. Perhaps no other passage of the Bible is more confusing or more difficult to understand. Luke reports that there will be signs and the earth will be in distress, a sort of cosmic upheaval. Some believe we are in those kinds of times right now with wars, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters like floods, fires, and earthquakes. Prognosticators forecast the actual date and times of the return of Christ. But Luke is very vague on timing. He does not give us any clue about when. While we can get hung up on the WHEN, Jesus focuses us on the HOW. How we are to live as a community of disciples, as star followers, is much more important here. Most importantly, we must pay attention, keep awake, Jesus says. That is how we live in the interim, the in between times. So what are we looking for? Signs of the kingdom. When we see them Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Jesus offers a parable to let us know for what we are looking. Jesus tells us that it will be like a fig tree beginning to bud or the first daffodils popping up, and for us, that means the start to summer. Summer is a time of new life, a sort of redemption from the death of winter. Summer is a hopeful time, full of possibilities.

In the meantime, we live, love, work, and struggle between these two great events, the coming of Christ into the world celebrated at Christmas and the Second Coming, His return. We can face anything with courage and hope because we know how the story ends, with the triumph of the risen Christ.

With all the terrible things going on in the world, we could despair into fear. Fear drives so much of our lives. Fear makes us small and mean. We cannot see any good when we are afraid. But faith is the opposite of fear. Faith gives us hope and courage, especially in dark times. Faith helps us see the little

buds on a fig tree or signs of the Kingdom in our midst. Hope and courage is what our world needs. And of all people, Christians, those who follow the Light of Christ, can live that way. We are people of hope.

In Howard Zinn's essay adapted for *The Impossible Will Take a Little While; Perseverance and Hope in a Troubled Time*,¹ he writes this:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

I bet you could come up with a number of ways God is working and redeeming in our time. Think about it. Where have you seen courage, compassion, kindness, sacrifice lately?

Last week we took a family road trip. We were able to visit with one of my best friends, Becky, and her family in Louisville, KY. Since Becky and her family needed to get up for school and work the next day, we actually stayed with Becky's parents. Becky's mom, Anna Gray, told us about what her church is doing. In fact, she was so excited to tell us that she is teaching women to sew. These women are refugees who have been resettled there with the Kentucky Refugee Ministries. This ministry was the vision of Highland Presbyterian church member Donna Craig, who cared about displaced people, especially children. Two days a week the women take a break from their English classes to learn to sew. The women are from countries like Sudan, Nepal, and Congo. They have developed friendships and skills. In fact, they were invited to the Kentucky State Fair to share their sewing skills. They are making money off their crafts now. One 21 year old young woman who saw her family executed in front of her, said, "This was the best day of my life!"

Anna Gray could not stop talking about these friends and how she has been welcomed into their homes. She told us they are proud Christians and all have prominent prints of Jesus. They have offered and received the love of Christ. I could tell it was as much a gift to Becky's mom, Anna Gray, as it must be to these refugee friends. Their church, Highland Presbyterian, has been enriched by welcoming these strangers. Each year they sponsor one new family into the project. In a recent article on this I read,

Matt Nickel, associate pastor at Highland, says of their recent experience welcoming a family from Syria, "I don't know much Arabic, but I do know *shukran*, 'thank you,' and the family is constantly saying that," said Nickel. "They're always bringing us water, juice or coffee when we visit. There's a real kind of hospitality when you go over to their house."

“Here’s a family who has lived through extraordinary circumstances and come to the United States with open hearts and so much to contribute to our community. ... I guess they change us in a way too.”ⁱⁱ

In a time of great fear, Christians are people who have hope and courage, like these members of Highland Presbyterian. Jesus reminds us that it is not about WHEN he returns, it is about HOW we live in the meantime. We have hope through Jesus Christ. That hope does not disappoint us, but empowers us to be brave. Hope is not just a churchy, pious thing. It is how we wait together for Christ to return. In the meantime, we stand in Christ's stead the best we know how until he returns. We can be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them. We can bring the most of Christ's healing and hope because unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all. In hope, we can welcome and befriend a stranger, give groceries to a family for Christmas, give and pledge our money generously, and serve one another with cheerful hearts.

I bet you could come up with a number of ways God is bringing HOPE in our time. Jesus Christ is redeeming us, not just on the cross and the resurrection, but over and over again.

Where have you seen such courage, compassion, kindness, sacrifice lately?

Turn to a neighbor and share with them where you have seen God at work bringing HOPE.

I would love to hear some of those ways. Send me an email or write it down and slip a note into the offering plate. With all the bad news in the world, it is up to us to share the good news, signs of God's love and mercy, justice and righteousness. In conclusion David Lose writes,ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus reminds us that he is the Lord of history and, because we trust that he will in time bring all things to a good end, we can in the meantime stand together in courage and compassion and treat all persons with the love of God we have known in him. This is the hope that is the hallmark of Christian community, the hope that rings throughout Scripture each time a biblical character sings that summary of the Gospel, “Do not fear.” It is a message never more needed than today, when so many of our actions and decisions seem driven by fear, a lack of confidence, and an overwhelming sense of scarcity.

In precisely this context, our communities can be places of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness. We can remind them, in the words that come at the end of this season, that the light of Christ shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. We can, in other words, when we begin to grow afraid, bid each other again and again to stand up and raise our heads, confident that our redemption draws near.

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ⁱ Howard Zinn, “The Optimism of Uncertainty” in *The Impossible will Take a Little Time*, Paul R. Loeb, Ed. (Basic Books: New York, 2014)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/10/2/presbyterian-congregation-creates-home-syrian-refu/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, ...in the Meantime blog, “Advent 1C;Stand up and Raise your Heads,” November 23, 2015 at www.davidlose.net.