

**Luke 21:25-36;** Advent 1 , Yr C; Despair and Hope; Dale Ramerman

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our church calendar says this is Advent I, the first Sunday of a new church year. We'll be reading the Gospel of Luke this year, the Gospel in which women have the highest profile. Our Gospel for today is about physical signs about the promised coming of the Son of Man. Most scholars say Luke is writing about the second coming or return of Jesus. But one notable Anglican scholar and Bishop, N.T. Wright, says our gospel reading is about Jesus' first coming, his birth in Bethlehem. Or, perhaps it is about both the predicted birth of the promised one in Bethlehem and his return to establish God's kingdom on earth.

Because this Sunday begins a new church year, I should greet you with a "Happy New Year." But how happy are we? Are we living in days of hope or days of despair? Is looking forward to something year after year, 2000 times, amazing faithfulness, or unimaginable foolishness?

Our world and our country, at time seem close to seem close to hopeless. Whatever your political persuasion, is there any redemption for a country, dependent on undocumented immigrants for agriculture and food production, that randomly arrests and deports its farm workers? A college friend who farms in Eastern Washington, tells me he can still find some workers, but has great difficulty finding workers who will drive the trucks with the harvest to the processing facility. They are fearful they'll be stopped by "ICE" for driving while appearing Mexican, and will be summarily deported. What kind of country would separate immigrant children from their parents and incarcerate them separately? What kind of country would tear gas families with children who want to petition for asylum, at our border. Jesus commanded us to welcome the stranger and alien. We're imprisoning and gassing them, forcefully returning the parents to the misery of the land from which they fled, while keeping the children incarcerated here.

And, we've repeatedly alienated our NATO partners who joined with us to deter Russian aggression and now are threatening to withdraw from that alliance, and deeply offended Canada.. Members of Congress are at each other's throats, and confidence in our president is at a record low.

It's not just our country. Great Britain, historically our closest ally, is lurching toward populism and isolation, withdrawing from the European Union. Germany, which has admitted the largest number of African refugees, is shutting off its welcome, and is also turning toward populism.

Populism, a political movement that contends the rights and powers of ordinary people are being exploited by a privileged elite, undercuts public confidence in our basic institutions. How often do we hear attacks on the motives and trustworthiness of our civil institutions: the courts, Congress, the president, military, police, the, newspapers, television news. None of these institutions is perfect or always free of corruption, but collectively they make up our democracy. A democracy can function only when there is a broad consensus that these institutions, at least most of the time, are acting in the public interest. That support has seemingly evaporated in country after country, including our own.

So my question is, how can we rise above discouragement and despair, for the 2000<sup>th</sup>

time, as we again begin our journey through Advent?

The book of Jeremiah was written in Exile, that period 600 years or so before Jesus' birth, when the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed, and the southern kingdom of Judah was captive in Babylon. Worst of all, Jerusalem had been destroyed. The surviving children of Israel had seen a slaughter of their people, and had no hope of ever returning. They lived in despair, asking, whether God had forgotten the chosen people? Had God turned away from the covenant made at Sinai? Was God powerless compared to the more powerful Babylonian deities? How could the community survive the disaster that had befallen them?

In the words of Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered you, O Zion.

As for our harps, we hung them up  
on the trees in the midst of that land.

For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,  
and our oppressors called for mirth;

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

How shall we sing the Lord's song  
upon an alien soil?

In the midst of this unimaginable sense of loss, when God seemed to have disappeared, the prophet Jeremiah, who personally suffered imprisonment and deprivation, wrote,

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.'

Our Gospel reading also talks of signs of better things to come using the image of the fig tree. The son of Man will be seen coming with power and glory; our redemption is drawing near. Look at the fig trees; they've been sprouting leaves as a sign that summer is already near. It happens every year.

The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is returning, but that he is coming to build God's kingdom on earth, as we pray each time we recite the Lord's prayer. Jesus and his coming means we have hope despite all that seems to be falling apart. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We read these words, not only in the face of our current distress as a nation, but even more, as a people of God who have been blessed in so many ways, as individuals and as a community bound together by the love of Christ, as a part of Christ's church that has served and continues to serve a needy world.

Amen.

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