



## *“Audacious Hope”*

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

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**November 29, 2009**

First Sunday of Advent

About fifty years ago, mainline Protestants discovered the ancient Christian season of Advent. It is more accurate to say, we “rediscovered” Advent. After all the larger church has been happily celebrating Advent for about seventeen hundred years!

I remember my introduction to Advent. I was a seminary student at the time. I grew up in the Free Church tradition which paid no attention to the church calendar. One of my seminary professors was Lutheran and he invited his students to St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church to hear him preach on the second Sunday of Advent.

Gloria and I walked into St. Matthew’s and I was overwhelmed by the thick symbolism everywhere. The Advent color, purple, adorned the pulpit and altar and was prominent in all the Christmas decorations in the sanctuary. An Advent Wreath was front and center and as the service began, acolytes proceeded down the middle aisle and lit the Altar candles and two of the Advent candles. The Scripture Lessons were announced as Advent readings. The sermon was memorable; its theme: “Your salvation is nearer than when you first believed.”

I was hooked and have celebrated the Advent season ever since.

Advent is the Latin word for “coming.” Advent celebrates the one who came, Jesus Christ, the one who will come again, the same Christ and the one who continues to come to us day by day, Christ the Lord. Advent is the beginning of the church year. It is the four Sundays before Christmas Day along with the days in between.

Originally a church-wide fast in preparation for the great feast of Christmas, its point is anticipation and preparation for the great day. It seems impossible to fast during Advent these days. The American practice of Christmas seems to be a month long feast of sorts.

There is, however, a remnant of the old practice of fasting. During Advent we sing songs of anticipation and preparation and hold off singing Christmas carols until Christmas Eve. It’s a musical fast! That frustrates many churchgoers who want their Christmas music all month long. I know a cranky pastor who answers such criticism with a rather cranky retort, “If you want Christmas music, go to the mall. Here it’s Advent.”

Advent has a seasonal color, purple or royal blue, indicating we await our king. The Advent Wreath has a candle for each of the four Sundays of Advent. The candles stand for hope, peace, joy and love. We sing music of anticipation and/or mystery as we wait for the One who comes to us again and again. We hear Lessons about preparation and promise that build anticipation. The idea is to build hope, peace, joy, and love in us by the discipline of listening, watching and waiting.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of hope. The Lessons for the day point to the future and urge us to hope for God's future. The first Sunday of Advent always speaks about and points to Christ's Second Coming when God completes what God began when Christ came to us the first time.

That Christian hope is central to our faith. What God began in Christ, God will some day complete. The great Shalom Jesus gave to the world will one day be fulfilled when God renews the whole world.

At present, we live in the meantime between Christ's first and second comings. We live by faith and that faith has a future dimension, hope.

We humans know something about hope. Hope seems to lie as deeply in the human soul as most anything. Alexander Pope put it well, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." And it does. In the darkest night, we hope for a better day. We love stories of hope rising out of hopeless situations. They stir the soul and promote more hope. Often such stories of hope make the news.

*The Washington Post* told such a story last week. The story featured an eleven-year-old girl who is being raised by her eighty-five year-old great grandfather. The girl was abandoned by her mother when she was an infant and her great grandfather took her in his care.

They are poor. They live on the old man's Social Security and what he can make in a part-time job. Their neighborhood is dangerous so the great grandfather made sure the girl is in a school in a better place. She takes public transportation to school. It's an hour trek, and great grandfather goes with her every day to make sure she's safe.

He has great hopes for the girl and he also hopes he lives long enough to see her into adulthood. I read the story and it reached deep into my heart and stirred something elemental. I hope for them too, and I hope for the world.

We teach our children to hope. We want them to dream large dreams and we tell them such dreams can come true because often they do. Humans are by nature dreamers. President Woodrow Wilson put it well:

We grow great by dreams. All big men are dreamers. They see things in the soft haze of a spring day or in the red fire of a long winter's evening. Some of us let these great dreams die, but others nourish and protect them, nurse them through bad days, till they bring them to the sunshine and light which comes always to those who sincerely hope that their dreams will come true.

Our literature and popular entertainment feature stories of hope that are often incredible but always inspiring. We cannot help ourselves. We hope.

Some of our hopes are trivial, "I hope to win the lottery." Other human dreams are profoundly moral. Who can forget Dr. Martin Luther King's great speech, "I have a dream." His dream stirred the soul of a nation and the world changed. It contained a power beyond itself to create what it dreamed.

Or, hear of Nelson Mandela who had a dream for his people in South Africa:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 29 November 09**

Mandela and King's dreams have come to live in powerful, yet incomplete ways. It seems the capacity to dream great dreams is accompanied by the capacity to create great things.

Gloria's brother went to high school with a boy who lived above a bar in a tough river town on the Ohio River. His single mother ran the bar where he spent many hours of his childhood and adolescence. I don't suppose anyone in town expected much of him. After all, his mother didn't amount to much.

But somewhere along the way the boy in the bar began to dream of a better life. He went to college, entered business and made a fortune. After years away from home, he's returned to that decaying river town and is buying up the buildings on Main Street, one at a time, and restoring them. He dreams of an old town made new. Dreams do come true.

Americans, of all people, tend toward hope. Our national story begins with a tiny colony that, against all odds, defeated an Empire and became an independent nation with dreams. Over the centuries this has been a land of opportunities where people born on the wrong side of the tracks can make something of their lives. Generations of immigrants came in poverty and made good lives for their children. Generation after generation has grown up expecting a better life than their parents. We learned to expect national progress never to end.

I grew up in such a world. My teenage years were spent in Dayton, Ohio, then a prosperous blue-collar city dominated by General Motors and the National Cash Register Company. Hundreds of other smaller companies supplied those giants with parts, machines, and services.

Dayton was a city of immigrants, first from Europe, then more recently poor whites from Appalachia and poor blacks from the Deep South. They made something of themselves and wanted even more for their children. Back then, if you got a job at GM or "The Cash" you had it made -- good pay, generous benefits and lifetime employment. We believed in progress. We had hopes.

That American Dream is tarnished now. Dayton lost GM and NCR and those machine and tool and die shops died too. Half the population left and the city is what my brother-in-law describes as a ghost town.

The larger dream of the western world is tarnished too. The modern dream believed in inevitable progress. The world would get better and better. It was only a matter of time. Then the horrors of the 20th century, the bloodiest century in history perhaps, stopped progress in its tracks. The Marxist Dream of a classless society came and went. The Modernist dream of inevitable progress disappeared too. The future is in severe doubt.

The postmodern dream doesn't feature much of a future. No grand narrative like inevitable progress is possible they tell us now. No future is certain. All we have is the present. That loss of hope is accompanied by other tragic losses. Without any good future, what is there to stir heroism, create large dreams, and foster soaring visions? What is there, like for Mandela, worth sacrifice, even dying for?

What we do have in this present is a Great Recession which threatens everyone's future, lingering wars which may bankrupt us, radical ideologies willing to kill the innocent in the name of God, and enough personal despair to dampen any Christmas celebration.

Nevertheless, hope still springs eternal....Our president was elected on a platform of hope. People still seem to be stirred by grand hopes and dreams regardless of the darkness of the hour. The passion for a better, just, and peaceful world still bears creative power. There is far more moral power in the message of hope than its common opposite, fear, anger, and grievance -- messages not good for persons or society.

And once again Advent rolls around with its annual message of hope. At this time of the year, even the most cynical among us pause for a moment and at least wish the Christian message of peace, hope, joy and love might be true, if only for a moment in time.

And as always Advent shines a light into a dark world. The world scene is fraught with danger and perils aplenty. We all carry our own darkness deep in our souls. Christmas is the most difficult time of the year for many people. The memories of lost loved ones darken the Christmas spirit. The stresses of the season exacerbate the tension in families and relationships. The short, dark days depress, and the specter of those Christmas bills lies not far ahead – and many people have less this year than former years. Members of my family are without work and have little hope of finding work.

And yet we dream. Advent comes to disturb our present darkness and to interrupt our ordinary lives. Advent intends to make us pause and think, sing and pray – and hope.

Christian hope is much, much more than human optimism. Our hope is grounded in God. Hoping I might win the lottery is grounded in nothing except impossible odds. Dr. King's hope for a better America was grounded in the inherent moral power of justice and righteousness and the conviction that God is committed to that dream of justice, love, and righteousness.

The church lives or dies by the conviction that in Jesus Christ God came to interrupt history, that in Christ, God inaugurated the salvation of the world, and that in Christ the world (and we in it) have a future.

St. Paul summed up the Christian faith in a simple but power statement, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself...and has given us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Therefore the church hears the voice of Christ as the voice of its Lord, “The kingdom of God is among you!” In that kingdom, God comes with healing and peace for all. And, we confess, some day God will finish what God began that first Christmas.

That hope is not naïve. Faith in that God of justice and peace requires struggle and wrestling with evil in ourselves and the world. And Advent, as always, requires some housecleaning in us. And, in the meantime, we believe that God's good future bends back into the present and it works....

The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.

And so we light our candle of hope, we teach our children to hope, and we turn the light of God on ourselves and hope for a community of faith that embodies God's dream for the future. We are saved by hope.

Amen