

Watching the Signs

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Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

We begin in silence... that phrase keeps resonating in my thoughts as I've been planning Advent worship. We begin in silence. Let us take a moment to center ourselves in the silence ...

I was visiting my Dad this week, and Dad and I spent one afternoon and evening with his sister Anne, looking through old family photos and having dinner at her retirement community. The dining room was, of course, all decorated for Christmas – with two Christmas trees, several wreaths, and stockings, and on the way out, I saw a little sign that read, "Dear Santa, Define 'good'." Someone was looking for a little wiggle room, I think. But we all want to know where we stand, and at some level (whether we can recognize it or not) most of us are worried that in some way or another, we might not measure up.

Certainly one of the things Jesus heard from people again and again was some variation of this question: "Define 'good'". I remember some years ago when I served on a commission in my last presbytery – it was called the Roots Commission and we were charged with trying to discern the roots of disagreements within the presbytery. Three of us who were on the Commission were identified as being among the more liberal clergy in the presbytery, and three were identified as being more conservative. One of the other pastors on this commission has been the minister in Manitowoc since right before I came to Frame – so he and I have been colleagues for quite a while. One of the conservative ministers on this commission shared with us that a major fear he had was that he might die with some unconfessed sin and so not go to heaven – that is a real fear of not measuring up! I always wondered why he would dedicate his life to serving a god whom he understood to be so legalistic and petty, a god who would disregard his life of faithfulness over a timing issue. It seems to me that such a picture of God is very different from the God I read about in the Bible.

And yet people in the time of Jesus, and people in our own time, often seem to be afraid of God – and that fear colors the way we read the Bible, and hear the words of Jesus.

This passage from Luke is one of those that seems to make people uncomfortable and even a little nervous, and yet it represents a style of writing that was intended to provide comfort. Jewish apocalyptic literature was an ancient literary form that drew parallels between contemporary events and a cosmic battle of good and evil. Its purpose was to comfort people who were undergoing hard times, to assure them that their experiences held significance from a universal perspective.

Luke's Gospel is thought to have been written shortly after a failed Jewish rebellion – the Temple had been destroyed again, and the Jewish community was devastated. Remember, Christians at this time were largely still part of the Jewish community—even Gentile Christians were connected to Judaism, because they were becoming part of what was at the time a sect within Judaism. So these words of Jesus, suggesting that there was a cosmic dimension to the destruction that the community had experienced, was reassuring them that the God had taken notice of their experience.

In difficult or frightening times, it makes a huge difference whether people respond in fear or in hope. We certainly see this in our own times, and we can watch the signs in our own times for signs of hope or fear.

Do we see immigrants as part of the ongoing history of our nation, whereby each generation of new residents brings interesting diversity and an eagerness to participate in American culture and growth? Or do we see immigrants as outsiders who will likely threaten what we most value? Are we responding with hope or fear?

Do we see new industries that promote alternative energy development as an exciting sign of a hopeful response to the realities of climate change? Or do we fear that changing regulations to encourage innovation will handicap established industries?

Do we see increases in voter turnout as a wonderful demonstration of democracy's strength? Or do we think of more people voting as a problem?

When we respond in fear, we often move on to prejudice, hatred, and even violence. When we respond in hope, we may find new capacities for change, for new experiences, for being surprised by joy.

The first candle in Advent is often called the candle of Hope – and it does seem fitting to begin this season in hope. Apocalyptic literature was intended to inspire hope. In the reading from Luke, Jesus speaks of a time when people will be afraid, and then he says that in the face of that fear: *stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near*. Hope is something we do – it is not merely a state of mind. Indeed

religion is not merely a set of beliefs – religion has to do with how we live our lives. And can we live our lives from a stance of welcome? Welcoming the stranger, welcoming the future, welcoming the possibilities And the season of Advent, as it anticipates the birth of Jesus, reminds us of this, because it reminds us that this is true for God as well as for us. We don't just believe that God exists – we believe that God acts in the world, that God energizes the world in love, that God is eager to work in, through, among, and around us. There's really nothing abstract about the Christian faith – as I've said before: it is a reality-based religion, based in the real lives of real people, found in the real impact of our faith on our lives, in the real experience we have of God giving us the capacity to choose love, to choose peace, to choose hope.

The prophet Jeremiah was speaking to the Jewish people who had been sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, and he proclaimed hope: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness." God is our righteousness—our goodness comes from God, and God's love for us, not from our measuring up in some way.

And this is what happens when we choose hope—because hope is a choice. We can embrace our own goodness, in ways that empowers us to be of good courage. In difficult times, we could feel fear, but we can choose to act in hope—to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, to care for the widow, the orphan, and to free the oppressed. When we choose hope, we create the conditions for community, for belonging, for courage. Remember that the word courage comes from the same root as coronary—choosing courage means to choose full-heartedness. It is a choice for hope.

The season of Advent is about the light of God – the light of hope, of love, of full-heartedness piercing the darkness of fear, of loneliness, of hatred. And so we begin by lighting one candle, the candle of Hope, because this is how we begin. We begin with one choice, the choice to reject fear and to embrace hope. We do this by the actions we choose – by tutoring children, or helping with hunger relief, by eating less meat, and producing less trash, by greeting the stranger, and caring for creation. The ways that we work for change in the world create hope, and they are, as the late President George H.W. Bush said, "...a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky." The hope we choose becomes the light pointing the way to God's love made manifest in the world.

Choose hope.

Amen.