

November 29, 2015 (Advent 1)

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Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In 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."

New Testament Reading: Luke 21:25-36

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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

²⁹Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees;³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 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, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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."

Sermon: An Improbable Hope

A couple of weeks ago I went to an improv comedy show called, “The Best Medicine.” Improv comedy, if you aren’t familiar, is a very specific kind of performance where actors create spontaneous, comedic scenes based on some kind of audience input. There is something about knowing that these actors are just diving into the scenes without any kind of script or safety net that makes it thrilling to watch, in my opinion. It also tends to be raw, authentic, and very funny.

I’ve seen a fair amount of improv and even taken some classes myself. But I still couldn’t quite believe the premise of “The Best Medicine.” According to the flyer, it was a comedy show about mental illness. Specifically, the organizer of the show had recruited four brave people to write short essays about their own experiences of mental illness: depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. One at a time, they got up onto the stage in this tiny theater and read their pieces. There was nothing funny about the essays. They were typed or handwritten on sheets of paper that shook like leaves in their hands. It was clear that what they were sharing was vulnerable and painful and in some cases, still unfolding.

One woman talked about drinking a fifth of liquor every night in order to hold her sadness at arms length. She wasn’t even always sure why she was sad, and that was maybe the scariest part of all. A man shared a story of driving hours in a manic state, spending all of his money at fast food restaurants before realizing what he was doing, before calling his mom and dad to explain that he had done it again. “I could hear the fear and disappointment in their voices, even though they were trying to conceal it,” he said, his own voice shaking.

All the stories had that kind of vulnerable, confessional quality to them, like an AA testimony, and when the speaker finished reading and jammed the papers back into their pockets, the room filled with warm, generous applause.

But before the applause had even run its course, the improv performers – who had not heard the pieces before - were moving out onto the stage, lifting details, quotes, and settings from the stories into their comedy.

Now comedy about mental illness are nothing new. And certainly mental illness among comedians is nothing new. But this off-the-cuff joking about real people's suffering – people who were right there in the room – that's some high-stakes improvisation.

In one scene, a man walks into a Quizno's sub shop and orders the usual sandwich, only to discover that all the employees of the shop are devils. He's unnerved by this but proceeds with his order.

"Would it be possible to get my sandwich...toasted?" he asks meekly.

"Not a problem," the devil rasps. And the audience is dying laughing.

On the side of the stage I see the man who recently spent all of his money in a manic fast-food rampage. The man whose face was quivering with grief only minutes earlier. Now he's got this bemused smile. A minute later he enters the scene himself as another customer. "Do you guys have any hot peppers?" he asks.

Later in the show the exact phrase that a woman's mother screamed at her during a psychotic episode becomes a catchphrase in a television game show.

Throughout this performance, when I wasn't laughing or crying, I was just amazed at how gracefully they were pulling it off.

Never – not once – did it feel like a person with mental illness was being mocked. Never did it feel like mental illness was being trivialized.

Instead, it was more about the absurdity of being a human being. It was more about laughter as some kind of audacious, resilient hope. It was about our private, secret pain being redeemed in community. That's church, friends. Or at least it should be.

Later, upon reflection, I recognized that feeling as a certain kind of improbable joy – made more improbable and more joyful somehow by the fact that it was borne out of a brutal honesty. It's hard to explain, I think, the way that suffering, honesty, and hope sometimes weave

themselves together like interlocking tree trunks. “We need to remind each other” writes Henri Nouwen, “that the cup of sorrow is also the cup of joy, that precisely what causes us sadness can become the fertile ground for gladness.” ¹

We get something of that mix of sorrow and joy today, I think, in Luke 21. Christians sometime gets pegged as naïve and unwilling to confront pain, but no one can accuse Jesus of being a Pollyanna. It starts before today’s passage with a casual conversation among the disciples about the beauty of the temple in Jerusalem.

“The day will come,” Jesus says, “when not one stone will be left upon another. It will all be thrown down.” (Luke 21:6)

The first question that everyone wants to ask, of course, is: “When?”

“Teacher,” the disciples ask, “when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

It’s a very natural question, isn’t it? If Jesus told you that your spiritual center was going to be destroyed, wouldn’t you like to know when to start packing up the valuables?

In response, and as if to heighten the tension, Jesus expands his focus to a frightening vision of the world in distress, our Scripture passage for today, which scholars call “the little apocalypse.” Far broader than a military assault on Jerusalem, Jesus seems to be talking about a cosmological event.

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

¹ Henri Nouwen. “Can You Drink The Cup?” Ave Maria Press, 1996.

"Then," he says. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Now, especially in our wing of the church we tend to steer clear of passages like these. We prefer to focus on the here and now and leave the Second Coming of Jesus to the street preachers. It just seems too bizarre, too fantastical. But there is an argument to be made, I think, that the idea of Jesus' in-breaking presence is central to the here and now, as well as the future.

When these things begin to take place, your redemption is drawing near. There it is again. That curious notion that as everything begins to break apart, redemption is drawing near. In the midst of chaos and suffering, an improbable hope.

The definitive theologian of hope is a German scholar named Jurgen Moltmann. His 1967 work "A Theology of Hope" was a flashpoint in the popular culture in a way that is hard for us to imagine today. ² It's all the more remarkable considering that the predominant philosophers of the day were existentialists like Camus who insisted that any talk of a transcendent God was hopelessly naive. "Hope as a rule makes many a fool," Camus famously quipped. ³

Moltmann's provocative assertion in "A Theology of Hope" is that the modern church has inadvertently agreed with this assessment. The progressive idealism of the 19th Century gave way to the fatalism of the 20th Century and the church quietly followed suit. "Where," he asked, "is the hope of those who follow Jesus Christ?" He argued that hope was like the oxygen that makes faith possible. "When hope is taken away," he wrote, "however eloquently or elegantly we discourse about faith, we are convicted of having none."

² "God Is Dead Doctrine Losing Ground To A 'Theology Of Hope,'" New York Times, March 24, 1968.

³ Jurgen Moltmann. "A Theology of Hope." 1967. www.pubtheo.com.

Here's the part that chilled me a little bit: "The despairing surrender of hope does not even need to have a desperate appearance. It can also be the mere tacit absence of meaning, prospects, future, and purpose."

What, truly, is more soul-sucking than a lifeless church? Droning through worship services, singing "Joy To The World" like you are trapped at the DMV? A church that's not truly hopeful, says Moltmann, is a church that has abandoned the One who broke the bonds of death against all odds. And that may be worse than no church at all.

We got into a spirited little debate on Wednesday at Bible Study about the difference between 'faith' and 'hope.' To some of us, the word 'hope' seemed a little lightweight, compared to a sturdier word like 'faith.' Hope can seem trifling, uninformed, and casual. "Faith," on the other hand, feels like an informed choice, an anchor, a commitment.

For what its worth, that's not what Moltmann means when he talks about hope. For Moltmann, hope exists in the contradictory space between our lived experience and the promises of faith. *I'll say that again: hope exists in the contradictory space between our lived experience and the promises of faith.* "Christian hope is resurrection hope," he writes. As resurrection hope, it must acknowledge death. As a matter of faith, it enters far deeper into death than we really care to go. "It is in the contradiction between present and future, experience and faith, that hope must prove its power."

Far from so much the self-help pabulum that passes for Christianity inside Barnes and Noble, enduring Christian hope is hard-earned, born of suffering, born of death. For better or worse, this is the way of Jesus.

Ever since Jesus made that terrifying little speech in Luke 21, people have been asking, "When?" And I guess its not surprising that almost anytime someone asks "When?" someone else pipes up to answer, "Now."

The Montanists of 200 AD swore with the authority of the Holy Spirit that Jesus would return in their very backyards. He did not.

In 1524, astrologist Johannes Stöffler announced that the world would end on February 25 in a massive flood. Despite the construction of a three-story ark, the world shouldered on.

When the Great Fire of London burned down huge portions of the city, including 87 churches, many Christians saw it as the first signs of the end. The fact that the fire occurred in 1666 didn't help one bit. But we are still here.

Halley's Comet created a worldwide panic in 1910 when its path seemed dangerous close to the earth. A religious group in Oklahoma attempted a human sacrifice and one company made a great deal of money selling bottled air.

I don't even have time to tell you about Hon-Ming Chen in Taiwan or Harold Camping, who predicted the end of the world in 1994, 1996, and 2011 before dying anticlimactically in 2013.⁴

It's too easy to ridicule these folks, especially as time passes and their predictions become more incorrect by the day. But I can't be the only one who felt some uncanny and uncomfortable resonance with the Scripture passage today. We might be reminded of terrorist attacks or failing municipal structures or a groundswell of violence or climate change. Pick a collective anxiety of the present historical moment, and it's easy to project it onto this text.

There is an immediate temptation, I think, to hear Jesus' words in Luke 21 and project them onto our current situation. This, I think, is a temptation we have to resist. Certainly the historical record would suggest that it's foolish to jump to conclusions. But it's also probably missing Luke's point. It's worth noticing, anyway, how Jesus ultimately

⁴ "10 Failed Doomsday Predictions," by Rachel Cole. Encyclopedia Britannica. www.brittanica.com.

answers the question. When the disciples ask, “When?” Jesus doesn’t answer, “Now.” He answers “*How.*”

That is, Jesus seems less interested in fixing a date to the calendar and more interested in talking about *how* to live faithfully in the in-between time. If we claim to live in this in-between time between the life of Jesus and God’s redemption of the world through Jesus – how then should we live? How should we respond to worldwide events that seem to negate that very hope?

For what its worth, this is precisely the question that Luke’s contemporaries would have been asking. The Roman Empire had indeed destroyed their temple and their city. Christians faced persecution and suffering. It was difficult to imagine the Kingdom of God that Jesus had described so vividly.

How then, should we live?

Essentially, pay attention. Be present. Lift up your heads.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life...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.” (Luke 21:34-36)

I like Mark’s version of this passage even better: “I say to you what I say to all: keep awake.” (13:37)

Before I took improv classes, I thought the secret of successful improvisation was being clever. Now I understand much better that being clever is, if anything, a liability. The secret of successful improv is being a good listener. It’s about paying such close attention to your acting partners that you enter into the scene as if you were always meant to be there. It’s about letting go of the past and it’s *almost* about letting go of the present. It’s about believing that the future, the thing that is *happening*, the moment that is coming into being, is the most

beautiful and important thing. It's about the grace of believing in what's possible.

For a thing called *improvisation*, it actually requires an enormous amount of discipline and skill. It's an art.

Friends, I think we hear a similar invitation today from Jesus, to practice disciplines that will keep us awake. By remaining present to what is happening in the world around us, by listening and participating we tend the fire of an improbable hope.

If Moltmann is correct, then the hopefulness of the "end times" is not some pie in the sky on a far away shore. It's a reality that permeates our present and propels us towards the future. In short, the hope that we hold for the future is actively transforming this present moment.

What we have to offer in these times, I think, is the conviction, the courage, the *audacity* to suggest that sometimes what is dead is not dead. We have the opportunity – through lived experience – to lift up our heads when the world suggests that cutting and running and building walls and arming the entire world is the only sensible option. While that may look like taking action, it may just be going to sleep.

What a profound and counter-cultural teaching, that our pro-active and hopeful response to a world on fire is to pay attention, be brave, and enter in.

Today we enter the Season of Advent. It's a season of waiting but it's also a season of preparation. Our theme this year is "People, Get Ready." It could also be "People, keep awake." We do this by creating advent wreaths. We do it by rehearsing the pageant and special music. We do it by gathering to pray for this entire city on the eve of these trials. We do it by listening closely to those in our midst who suffer.

We do it by lifting up our heads in the hope that our redemption draws near. O Come, O Come Emmanuel. We are watching and waiting for you.