

As if...

Menno Mennonite Church
November 28, 2021

Advent 1 Year C

Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-22 [I will read] ; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36 [please read/have read]

Focus Statement: Can we, dare we, embrace *hope* once more? We can when we remember God's steadfast goodness and the goodness of learning and walking in God's ways.

Purpose: To imagine the way of God that is already here realized that which we still wait to realize

Message: As people of hope, we are invited into the grace of God's mercies that far outstrips our expectations.

Sermon idea: When we are waiting for the coming of the rain, we will take what ever signs we can get. We look longingly to the sky, listen for the peal of thunder, prize each drop that points toward change. We anticipate the coming of what we expect; we never are prepared when it becomes even more than what we anticipate. We expect the rain, but are surprised by the flood.

Spiritually, we desire God's presence, but sometimes can lose ourselves in the flooding forth of grace. We can struggle to hope for change, but are invited to live as if the wholeness of the kingdom is here. We imagine the future, but we can struggle to live into that imagination. Jesus and Jeremiah invite us into the hopefulness of already, but not yet.

(Jer 33:14-16 NRS) 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.

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.

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."

Jeremiah 33:14-22 (JPS)

¹⁴See, days are coming—
declares YHWH—
when I will fulfill the promise
that I made concerning the House of Israel and the House of Judah.

¹⁵In those days and at that time,
I will raise up a true branch of David's line,
and he shall do what is just and right in the land.

¹⁶In those days Judah shall be delivered
and Israel shall dwell secure.

And this is what she shall be called:
“The LORD is our Vindicator.”

¹⁷For thus said the LORD:
There shall never be an end to men of David's line
who sit upon the throne of the House of Israel.

¹⁸Nor shall there ever be an end
to the line of the levitical priests before Me,
of those who present burnt offerings
and turn the meal offering to smoke and perform sacrifices.

¹⁹The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah:

²⁰Thus said YHWH:

If you could break My covenant

with the day and My covenant with the night,
so that day and night should not come at their proper time,
²¹only then could My covenant with My servant David be broken
—so that he would not have a descendant reigning upon his throne—
or with My ministrants, the levitical priests.

²²Like the host of heaven which cannot be counted,
and the sand of the sea which cannot be measured,

so will I multiply the offspring of My servant David,
and of the Levites who minister to Me.

I wonder: what is it that you struggle to imagine? As good, responsible adults, we don't spend a great deal of time with a sense of imagination on the agenda. Not out loud in any case. We might think wistfully of a different time or place, or remember what had been (advent being the season of traditions and rootedness after all), or think of a future for ourselves and those we care about that might take one shape or another. But we don't spend a lot of our time imagining. We put that away when the practicalities of life took over and we just needed to get serious and get back to work. Yet, still, I wonder what it is you imagine; for yourself? For your family? For our world? For our church? For our future? I would wager it would be an illuminating conversation to be had were we to allow ourselves to speak aloud that which we construct from within the stuff that escapes the filters of pragmatism and realism and actually speaks to that of our heart. I wonder where it might take us were we to afford ourselves even a bit longer with the dream before shaking ourselves awake in the harsh light of day. Sometimes, we can remain trapped within what is not because there is no way out, but because we find ourselves ill equipped to imagine that there is anything else possible.

Advent, above all, is a moment that asks us to exercise our imagination. Positioned at the beginning of the Christian year, it calls us to recall that which gives birth-literally-to the body of Christ. As the Christian Calendar has evolved, this also represents the end of the year, and points toward the future of what is yet to be, a future that, when we are honest, we struggle to imagine into being. Tied as we are to the present and the real with its broken justice and challenges to hope, we struggle to conceive of the different. Familiarized as we are with the more terrifying expectations of a returning Christ, we have sometimes given up the interpretation of the signs and symbols, leaving well enough alone. We struggle to imagine the moment of promise that the signs and symbols point toward because we have spent so much time building up mechanisms of the end that we forget the point of it all. What was meant to be the hope and the inspiring flame of the faithful has become that which we don't like to talk about, let alone envision or hope for because of the emphasis we have placed on the flames and destruction within. I wonder how we would revolutionize our faith were we to live in the expectation of the coming of Jesus Christ not as the point where God comes and evens the score for all time, but as the radical force for justice, righteousness and change at work in this time here and now and every time in the future? Can we imagine that?

There is little denying that we begin this season darkly. Even without the cue of falling snow, we feel that the season, and the long night that surrounds us. We hear that society is about to drive over the cliff. We know all too well the wounds of divisiveness that we carry. Discord dominates our world, our lives. It is hard to believe that things can change. It is hard to comprehend why things are the way that they are. It is hard to see signs of change, signs of hope, even if we are looking for them.

Speaking hope into time such as these, indeed any time, is all about envisioning a world that has yet to be and living as it is already here. Jeremiah, in our reading, is speaking to Israel in a time of crisis. While the end has not come, it is about to. The armies of Babylon are literally on the door step, and they are tearing down Jerusalem in an effort to fortify and save it. Jeremiah is in prison for declaring the word of the Lord: You will not be saved; but you will, in time be rebuilt. They were torn from everything they knew as holy, and the rights and rituals that could keep them in God's good graces. They were dominated utterly, and into this melee, Jeremiah speaks of the Day that will surely come. Those who heard Jesus' words were hardly better off. Dominated by the Romans, thoroughly separated from all but forgotten glorious history, they were ready to see the world change. And they looked to Jesus to change it. But Jesus does not give them what they want—a sure hope of present happy ending. Instead, he gives this all-too-vivid vision of the whole world coming apart at the seams before things really get better. Heaven and Earth shaking, the upset of the systems of earth and seas. In short, everything is going to be turned upside down. But when it does, he tells them, pay attention. Lift up your eyes. And you will see something incredible. Because the kingdom of God is at hand.

I think we have given up sign reading as an occupation. It's too bad. Because we lose something when we are no longer interested in actively reading and looking for those things that tell us God is at work. We don't lose advance warning of God's fiery judgment. It's that we postpone our seeing what God is about until a time and place to be named later and miss what is going on right in front of our faces—the kingdom here. And what a loss that is. We delay the kingdom until the idealized and distant future and we miss the present gift of God with us even here.

When I am in despair (and yes, pastor's get depressed too), I know it takes effort to see that is really going on around me, what really has been accomplished. But the effort always pays off, because chances are there are whole ways in which God has been at work around me that I

have remained blind to. When we are not looking for the ways of the kingdom, we are all that more inclined to think that the kingdom just might not be coming at all. We fail to exercise the imagination of a world that can ever change, let alone a God who would change it and bring it all to its final and fullest purpose.

All this brash language of cosmic and earthly upheaval might have been just the right recipe for speaking to folks like us. We are as inclined as anyone to be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness in the worries of life. We are all too contented to wade around the shallow end of this God stuff, wondering whether there might not be anything deeper. Add to this a modern, secular outlook and we are primed and ready to have our closed, numbed, unsuspecting worlds turned upside down. But perhaps it is exactly these sort of signs and figures we require. Flannery O'Connor puts it well: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures." It might just take signs such as these to get us to notice the flood of God's grace, to spur our imagination into new action after long dormancy.

We make these days times of memory. Of the that which has been. Perhaps that which once was and is no longer. We keep the good news of that which happened long ago and far away with good tidings to all people, shepherds, angels, and all the stuff that has been. We forget that this story, this event is as much about what is right here and right now as it was back then. We forget because we struggle to imagine God with us here. We forget that we live in the in-between times where we are asked time and again to chose whether we want to live in what we see before us, or in the certain knowledge of what really is just beyond the curtain.

Most of the time, our faith life is a practical barrier against where we are now. We are tempted, deeply, to assume that what is broken will stay broken, and the best we can do is ensure that we have a ticket to leave it all behind in the end. This faith is a faith of propositions and personal guarantees that reduces God as something coming we know not when, and we can acquire our spot there by making sure all is right and proper with us. As important as that is—to be right and ready—I do think that this is not all that there is.

Because we also have a fuller faith we can chose. A faith that exists in the as if. We can chose to live lives of fear and depression or we can live lives guided by the hope of God with us, believing and behaving that the God of the universe moves and makes things right here and now. We can take the risk and live as if the way of Nonviolence taught us by the one we follow is the

core by which the world could ever change. We could live as if there was a God who created us, loves us for who we are and not just what prayer we have prayed, and redeems even that which we are most ashamed of into that which God alone makes whole. As if “Love your neighbor as yourself” amounted to more than a fortune cookie wisdom, but the activation of a whole new way of being. As if the way of a Jewish Prophet who preached these things and so much more, practiced this, and was killed for it only to be raised again in vindication of it all by a God who hears and moves matters for us today. As if God’s spark exists not only in us (and we need to believe that deeply) but also with those with whom we disagree with and dislike the most. As if the kingdom of love, justice, and yes hope, always hope, is ALREADY real, ALREADY in place, already in effect in ever newness, every sprouting of justice, hope, and peace no matter what. As if God with us is not a matter of seasonal sentimentality, but the active hope even in the worst of times. For the God who will not break Covenant no more than stopping the night and day has spoken it; it is real, it is now. All we need to do is allow ourselves to imagine it, and live as if it is full here.

Perhaps we might be best served to spend our time imagining ourselves into the eventual future of a ringing judgement, waiting our cue to only then leap into action, but to reside in the hope of God’s good work, already present, already active, already moving toward the fullness that lies fully in God’s hands.

May we have the imagination, the vision, and the hope to live as if lives, incarnating the kingdom already, praying, always, for the not yet.