

HOPE II
Luke 21:25-36
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 29, 2015 - 1st Sunday of Advent

This week, while meditating on Hope, I seemed to find it everywhere or connect to it everywhere. And I do not mean the kind of hope where one has looking for deals a couple days ago in stores or tomorrow online, but hope from serious, life-altering circumstances. I saw it in a television show about a doctor racing against a clock to find a cure for a pandemic; and when he failed to find the cure in time to save a friend, he apologized to her, and she said it was okay, because he gave her hope in her last days. Or when I saw someone wearing a Batman tshirt, I thought about the Citizens of Gotham hoping that Batman would come save the day. But those are fictions, not real.

The early Church needed hope, because their situation was real. They were marginalized and persecuted by society, disowned by their families, and they faced execution on the whim of emperors and governors. And that is what today's selection is about, giving reassuring hope to those early Christians.

The selection is the end of the chapter that started with the story of the poor woman giving two coins at the Temple. This was followed by Jesus prophesizing the destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 during a revolt, and a couple decades before the Gospel of Luke was written. He warned against listening to and being led astray by those saying that the end is near. He said a lot about the fall of Jerusalem in very dark terms, then, with today's selection, He switched to a reassuring message of hope for the believers.

He told them that when things go really bad, He will be there to meet you, so hold your heads high. That no matter what happens, His words will stay. And do not worry, just stay watchful and tend to your Christian duties, and everything will be okay, no matter what.

The members of the early church needed to hear this message; they needed reassurance and they needed hope. Their lives were at risk, just being a Christian. Luckily, we do not face the same type of dangers that they did

today in this country. We do not need to worry about being persecuted or ostracized or marginalized for our faith. In this country, no one has to fear any of that, no matter their faith or even lack of faith, so hope takes on a different quality.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in other parts of the world today. When one loses all hope in their situation, and the only hope that they can see is to escape that situation completely and go elsewhere, hoping that they find safety there, they can become a refugee. We have all seen the Syrian refugees in the news. We have heard their stories and we have seen the pictures of their suffering.

For the past couple of days, I have been reading the stories of individual refugees. Reading about how they lost hope in the safety of their own homes, and how they hoped that they could find safety and security outside their country until it is safe to return. Unbelievably horrible stories of dangers and wounds endured. Driven on by the hope that just over there, they will be safe.

I did find one story that was quite different. A story full of hope from the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, northeast of the capital, Amman.

A 23 year old man named Youssef had fled his village of Khirbet Ghazaleh four months before when the Syrian government bombed it, destroying his home. While at the camp's market, he caught sight of a 24 year old woman named Samah. He discovered that she was from the same village as him, though he had never met her before. He courted her, and they decided to get married, and a reporter and a photographer from the Washington Post happened to be there that day, and reported the event.

At 2:30 on their wedding day, Youssef, dressed in a black suit and purple tie, knocked on the rusty metal door of his bride's home, which had been converted from being a public latrine. Samah emerged wearing a white satin dress, fully veiled, with music blaring from a portable loud speaker and her girlfriends dancing in the dirt street. Only the bride & groom were dressed up, the rest wearing t-shirt and jeans.

The only vehicle in the entire camp was a blue Opel taxi, which the bride, the groom, and their mothers, and some small children stuffed into. The tradition is that there should be many cars, a convoy of honor to transport the couple, but there being only one car at the camp, instead there was a crowd of teenage boys as their escort down the dirt roadway with trash-filled puddles. The taxi's horn was described as the weak bleat of a mildly annoyed sheep.

They arrived at the groom's home, a couple of metal trailers with a U.N. tent set up between them to make a shady courtyard, to more music and the young men dancing in the dirt next to open trash pits. They entered and ate a meal of some chicken and rice.

There was not any religious or civil authority available to officiate their wedding, only a village elder, luckily they were all from the same village, to bless the wedding, but it will not be recognized as official by their home country or host country. But that did not matter to the newlyweds, they are happy with each other.

Youssef thanked God, and said that despite the monotony and hopelessness of refugee life, he feels lucky to have found Samah at the refugee camp.

Can you imagine it? Enduring hopelessness and surrounded by the hopelessness of every single person around you, and stuffed into a refugee camp in a foreign land, but still having enough hope in the future to find love and go through with a marriage that may not ever be officially recognized? That is an amazing story of hope amidst the very definition of hopelessness.

In this Advent season, we celebrate the coming of four gifts that Jesus will bring us. Hope is the first of these. Jesus brings us hope. The big Hope, the assurance that no matter what happens, as long as we follow Him, He will lead us to safety; but also the everyday hopes. Jesus calls us to serve one another, and sometimes, that serving can bring Hope to someone's life. It can be any type of hope, and can be done in any way, and sometimes, we may never know what the effect we've had on someone and their life, but that shouldn't stop us.

Whether it is a hope that comes from an every day lack of something, a major life event, or the darkest place where someone can be; Hope can inspire, hope can save a day, or even save a life. We can provide hope to someone, knowingly or not, we just have to be on the lookout for those who are in need, and respond to them, and give them HOPE.

Amen

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

Gracious God, we give You thanks for the hope you give us through Jesus, and through our loved ones. We pray that they continue to give us hope whenever we need it. As we start the Advent season and prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth, we pray that we remember why we are celebrating, and that no matter what happens, no matter how much we want to panic as the day approaches, that we remain calm and serene.

We pray for everyone who needs You. We pray for all who are sick and are suffering are healed; and that You guide the hands of their caregivers. We pray for all who are alone, that we can bring them company. We pray for all who are in distress, that we can bring them comfort. We pray for the forgiveness of sins, and we thank You for Your understanding. We pray for peace throughout your creation.

We offer to You the prayer of our hearts, especially...

May hope inspire us and lead us out of any despair or discontentments we encounter. And we pray that You move us to bring hope to those who may need it, and that You use us to be instruments of hope in Your service, in Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Advent Candle Lighting

The Gospel of John speaks of Christ as the true light coming into the world. In commemoration of that arrival, we light candles for the four weeks leading to Christmas and reflect on what each candle represents. And so we light the first candle, the candle of hope, and we dare to express our longing for the well-being of all creation.

First candle is lit.

Loving God, as we enter this Advent season, we open all the dark places in our lives and memories to the healing light of Christ. Show us the creative power of hope. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, that we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen

Luke 21:25-36

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

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

"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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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."