

“Watch”

Luke 21:25-36

The Dr. Rev. Andrew McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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First Sunday in Advent

If you consider that the way we structure our Spiritual discipline is in part like a calendar, then the first Sunday in Advent is like the New Year. Only it is not New Year's Eve. It's more like January 2, where we face the messiness of life.

The unpaid bills leftover from the excesses of the recent past. A beginning of the year, gray, cold, overcast day. Advent starts in the gathering gloom.

A stark awareness of the hard things about life. We could easily list all the ways that life has challenged and disappointed us. It raises the deeper question: How do people lose hope? It does not happen all at once. It's more like how you lose your hearing: exposed to loud noises.

Rock and roll artist Neil Young has a farm where he wanted to listen to his music cranked up loud. So he put giant amplifiers, one on the whole outside wall of the machine shed wall, other on wall of the barn. To balance this giant stereo, Neil would row into the middle of the lake, listen, and shout to his helper: “More barn!” He, like so many rockers, has lost a good deal of his hearing. It does not happen all at once. It happens over time.

Losing hope does not happen all at once. It comes on slowly. Over time. We start in life out all optimistic. How does that Mother Goose rhyme go?

*Rain on the green grass,
Rain on the tree,
Rain on the housetop,
But not on me.*

Over time the roof of our optimism begins to leak. A job turns into a nightmare. An investment disappears. A relationship fails. Our greatest hero becomes, maybe not becomes corrupt, but sells out and disappoints us.

Hope does not disappear all at once. It's gradual. In the empty place where optimism lived, now cynicism steps in. The feeling that everyone is out for themselves. Where once we had expected what is best among us, it is all replaced by hype and spin.

We can even begin to get cynical about God. We used to believe God would step in and magically save us. Like the ancient Greek theater: when the play came to an unsolvable problem, using a winch and pulley up top, a god-figure would drop down and take care of things. Deus ex Machina: god like a machine in the heavens. The kind of god that steps in from outside the play to fix everything. When we expect that of our God, and it does not happen, we get cynical.

When the rain starts to fall on us, and we move from surprise to cynicism. Then, even to nihilism: the feeling that it just does not matter. Or even that life itself does not matter.

The rain comes and keeps on coming. The flood waters rise and do not go away. We become disappointed, angry, contemptuous, distrustful, detached. The cynicism that leads to nihilism which is the death of optimism.

But wait a minute. Let's rewind. What if there is another way? Another way to believe? What if we see that cynicism is a type of faith: bad faith. And nihilism is a type of faith: bad faith. And the idea of Deus ex Machina, God who drops down to fix things like magic, is another type of faith: bad theology.

Human beings all live by faith. The real question is: what kind of faith do we have? What we believe matters. What if there is another way than all these ways that lead to disappointment, cynicism and despair?

Ours is not a god of magic: but a God who comes to us in history, in our social lives. If it took time to lose hope, then we need a God who can counter our hopelessness with an even greater force. It took time to lose hope: it takes time for hope to be born in us.

Advent: the recognition, the spiritual experience, that God plants the embryo of hope in us, and it takes time to grow. We need to make sure to nurture that hope: like that fetus that needs vitamins. Hope implanted in us starts small.

It faces the gloom, the gathering darkness, but refuses to recognize the gloom as the final word. Like the words of that powerful Advent hymn:

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty winds made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.*

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*Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, Nor earth sustain,
Heaven and earth shall flee away, When He comes to reign;
In the bleak midwinter, A stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.*

It is a hymn that reminds us that we are a people of faith who can look realistically at the cold hard facts of life. We are not in denial. Ours is not about some Freudian projection. God works in

history, and God has given us a word of hope. The scripture nurtures that hope by recognizing that things-as-they-are are not final.

The hope God reveals for us means that change is on its way. Over time – it is coming. No matter what else is going on, the presence of God waiting to be born means that we have hope. Hope can be born, and turn into reality among us.

So yes, when the rain comes, when the earth turns hard as iron, we are not naive; we expect it. We can face it head on, we can name it for what it is: real, but only part of the story.

By God's word, hope has been planted in us. Like the baby Jesus, it begins small. An embryo of hope that takes months and months to grow. The cynicism and nihilism that had desensitized us is being overcome.

Even a small embryo of God's hope can re-sensitize us. We regain our spiritual hearing. We can hear the angels sing. We regain our spiritual sight. We can see the acts of God's love around us. We are re-sensitized to the possibilities: God's hope re-opens our imagination to the possibilities of life. If cynicism desensitizes us, then hope resensitizes us to become aware of the growing possibilities of God.

We can face the world with all of its challenges, all of its harshness, greed, self-centeredness. We can stop wishing for easy answers, and start working toward the fulfillment of hope because hope has been implanted in our imagination.

The Scripture today says: don't get drunk, stay awake, and stay alert. My grandmother was part of the Women's Christian temperance Movement. That meant when she came to visit, we had to hide the booze. The scripture is saying something much deeper.

Stay awake. Stay alert. Don't get drunk. It means beware how drunk you can get on the riches and pleasures of life, focused on the things that do not matter, but fill up every moment, every closet. That end up taking up so much time every day, that end up taking up so much of your energy, that come to give you false promises, that will someday fail. They tempt you with cynicism, and nihilism.

Don't get drunk: means beware of thinking too much of your successes. Beware of thinking too much of your failures. As if your failures were the end of the story. Either one can get in the way of real hope.

Do not let your hearts be weighed down by dissipation, distractions that dull the mind, dull the perception. They will catch you like a trap catches an animal: unaware.

The opposite of distraction is vigilance. Stay awake. Stay alert. Keep our souls athletically trim, free of the weight of the excessive and useless. (Fred Craddock.)

God has planted hope in us: the story of a pregnant Mary. Hope grows like that embryo: slowly, overtime, as it is nurtured. Hope will be born: unexpectedly born, like a baby to a poor family, temporarily homeless, in a barn, unexpectedly, in unannounced places. Don't miss when hope is born and turns into reality. It will change your life. It will change the world.

Don't miss it. Pay attention to your life. Pay attention to the world. Learn to hope again – authentically. Live expectantly. Now is our time to practice hope: To expect the hope that has been implanted in us, among us and in some unexpected place in the world. God's redemptive, world changing love is drawing near. It's growing. Now. Now is our time: to hope again.