

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2012
Advent 2
Luke 21: 25-36

“Hope is Coming”

It's the first Sunday of Advent. The stores have displayed Christmas decorations since Halloween. A local radio station has been playing Christmas carols since mid-November, and Santa made his annual appearance in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day. Ah yes, the holiday frenzy is here.

Now, I have a confession to make this morning since we're on the subject of Christmas frenzy. It's time for me to come clean. I confess that I went to Wal-Mart on Thanksgiving night. You talk about frenzy! I have never in my life seen anything like it. The sad thing is, I didn't even have anything to buy. Margaret and I just decided on a whim to go and see what the fuss was all about. As we were leaving she said, “I don't think this is what the pilgrims had in mind.”

You could say that again.

And let me tell you, it's not what the church has in mind either.

If you were expecting Christmas carols and nativity stories this morning (since there *only 22 days left to shop*), you may have had a rude awakening when you heard the New Testament reading from Luke about the end of the world. Perhaps you were expecting more of what the culture offers us, not doomsday readings from the Bible. Maybe you were hoping for a little more joy and cheer-something along the lines of angels, shepherds, a cooing baby Jesus and a smiling Mary.

But here in the church, we begin the march to Christmas with the season of Advent, which is not a countdown to Christmas or a race to the finish line. No, Advent is something entirely different and completely counter-cultural; it is a time to slow down and wait-and not for just Santa, but for Jesus to be born *and* for Jesus to come again. This is why we hear stories about Jesus' second coming on the first Sunday of Advent.

Think of Advent as having two faces: one that looks to the past, and one that looks to the future. Advent's face toward the past is the one that anticipates the birth, and is the one we tend to celebrate. We can wax sentimental over a baby and wait with joyful expectancy for his birth. That's easy. As Owen Meany says bluntly in John Irving's wonderful book, “Any sap can be a Christian at Christmas.” It's easy to celebrate God's grace breaking into humankind through the birth of Jesus.

But waiting for the adult Jesus to come again? That's another story; one that just happens to involve distress among nations, roaring seas and waves (i.e. hurricanes), and fear and

foreboding. I don't know about you, but I'll choose the first coming over the second one any day.

But this story from Luke and others like it is a favorite for modern Millennialists. Think about the 65 million people who have purchased the Left Behind books, which popularize the belief that some people will be swept up into heaven and some will not when the second coming arrives. 65 million is a lot of people buying into the idea that when Christ comes again, there's going to be a battle between good and evil at Amegeddon of epic proportions, the anti Christ will be defeated, and some people will be swept up into heaven some won't.

A few weeks ago there was a story in the New York Times Magazine about people who stock up for the end times; they and their families were pictured with their provisions of canned food and bottled water; discussing the proportions of their bomb shelters. Tommy took it to school to share with his Social Studies class; and when he got home that day he told me that despite what some people think, the world is really not going to come to an end on December 21. Which is good, because I want to celebrate my birthday on the 22. But nevertheless, Tommy thought it would be fun to watch the movie 2012 on the 21st.

The rapture, Armageddon, the end of the world . . . it makes for good sci-fi movies and good books, but not good theology. When Jesus speaks here of the heavens being shaken, he's not talking about the dreaded coming of the end of the world; he's talking about the world coming just as God intended it to be all along, a world where justice and peace are the rule rather than the norm; where kindness and compassion and love are on display every day, not just in December; and where the news of a policeman buying shoes for the homeless barefoot man on the street doesn't make the news because it's so commonplace-something everyone does. That's what it means to wait in Advent for Jesus to come.

Advent means embodying and living the kingdom Jesus preached, so that when he comes again in glory he'll see that kingdom has come to fruition. And so, while Advent is a time of waiting, it is a time of active waiting, of working towards the future; towards the world God envisions, towards the kingdom of God, so that the prayer we all pray-week in and week out, may come to fruition. "Thy kingdom, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Advent means working towards that kingdom so that people may live with hope. It means working towards God's kingdom so that people who struggle; whose employment is uncertain; whose marriages are rocky; whose money is tight and health is shaky; where anxiety is a constant companion and Christmas is not the most wonderful time of the year, can know that hope is coming, Hope with a capital H is on its way.

William Sloane Coffin once told his congregation at Riverside Church in Manhattan "I don't want Riverside to be an institution for those interested in things religious. I want it

to irrigate the community with hope. (As quoted by John Buchanan in “The Work of Waiting”, November 29, 2009).

That is a great image for the church at any time but especially during Advent: “irrigating the community with hope”. Watering the parched places of people’s lives so that, just as Luke said, leaves may sprout on the fig tree in the middle of winter. *Irrigating the community with hope, working for the kingdom values Jesus proclaimed-the values of justice and peace and kindness and generosity that never die.*

I know I’ve said it before, but it’s worth saying again of how proud I am to see this church irrigate the community with hope. For the first time ever we ran out of ornaments on the Christmas tree and were, therefore, able to adopt more families -thereby irrigating more people with hope. The church irrigates the community with hope every day, week in and out week with the AA and GA groups we host; hosting neighborhood kids for a trunk or treat irrigates the community with hope, as does providing backpacks of food for school kids who don’t have food at home on the weekends. And these sorts of things only begin to scratch the surface of what this church does, of how it irrigates the community with hope.

My hope and prayer for all of you this advent season, is to that you know your work is not in vain, and that you continue to take the time to share this Hope with others. May you continue to work for God’s kingdom, support it with your resources, advocate for it, and proclaim it with your words and actions.

And if you should find yourself in a place of hopelessness and despair, know that God is coming.

May you trust, hope, and believe, that no matter what, God is coming for you. God will come with love and healing and hope into your life. God will come with light into whatever darkness you find yourself. God will come into your life, even when you can’t believe that’s possible.

During this wonderful, joyous, hopeful season of Advent, we hear the good news that God comes to us where we are, speaks words of comfort to us, feeds us like a shepherd, gathers us in his arms, carries us in his bosom, and gently leads us like a mother sheep. And I can think of no more precious gift than that. A gift that can’t be bought at Walmart on Thanksgiving night; that you don’t need to stand in a long line for; or order from amazon.com, because this gift comes, when we’re least expecting it, to all of us. And it is the most wonderful gift that any of us will ever receive.

Amen.