

Advent 1 Sermon
November 28, 2021

- [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)
- [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)
- [Luke 21:25-36](#)
- [Psalm 25:1-9](#)

Take my lips, and speak through them,
Take my hands, and work through them,
Take my heart, and set it on fire.
Amen.

Happy New Year!

Too soon? Actually, this first Sunday in Advent is the start of a new liturgical year. For the church geeks among you, this is year C, the third and final year in the Episcopal church's rotation of collects and readings.

And the New Year begins with Advent, a season of expectation, of preparation, of waiting, as we ready our hearts and minds for the celebrations of the birth of our Savior. Each of the four Sundays in Advent has a theme, but there are actually two different traditions regarding themes.

One tradition, used in our lectionary and readings for the season, is based on the idea that the first Sunday in Advent recalls the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and others, who predicted the coming of Jesus. The second Sunday focuses on the Scriptures. The third on the Holy family, in particular, Mary, the mother of Jesus. And the fourth on John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin who called on the people of Israel to prepare for Jesus' coming.

The other tradition, which we use in our liturgy of the candles, is based on the following key words: the first Sunday is hope, the second is peace, the third joy and the fourth love.

Both traditions come together in the central candle, representing Christ's birth, which is lit on Christmas Day (or, in some cases, Christmas Eve).

Where things get a bit complicated is when we combine the two traditions into a single strand. Then, we get situations like today, where our readings talk about "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." And I'm supposed to talk about hope based on that? I should have checked the lectionary readings more closely before volunteering to preach today!

Over the last few weeks, I've spent time researching how others have approached this conundrum. In some cases, preachers have chosen to focus on the death-and-destruction portion, using the examples of the prophets to call us to change our behavior, to repent and return to right living, so that we may have hope of a glorious future.

Others—and this seems to be more common—focus on hope. The reasons we, as Christians, have for feeling hope. The hopeful anticipation we can experience in the lead-up to Christmas. The feelings of excitement for what is to come.

But, as I looked at these passages, meditated and prayed, there still seemed to be such tension between the hopefulness and joy described in Thessalonians, and the mini-apocalyptic passages in Jeremiah and Luke.

So, I put it aside and, on Thanksgiving, I went to the hospital to begin my clinical hours as a chaplain, part of my training for ministry. As I began my rounds, I stopped by the nurses' station to check in before visiting patients. The entire desk area was covered in Christmas decorations, with miniature fake trees, and lights, and ornaments. Christmas carols were playing over the speakers, and a young CNA was be-bopping along as she put up decorations. All at 10:30 on Thanksgiving morning.

As I greeted her, I commented on the Christmas decorations, noting that we hadn't even gotten to the Thanksgiving turkey yet. The young woman, in all seriousness, informed me that she had noted that a number of the patients were down, or upset, to be stuck in the hospital on Thanksgiving, away from their families. And, with the restrictions on visitors, many of them were not able to see their families at all. Since they were finding Thanksgiving so difficult, this well-meaning, perky young woman decided that she would cheer them all up by moving straight on to Christmas, since everyone loves Christmas, right?

Where to begin? Looking past challenges, pushing aside our difficult feelings, rushing on in frantic preparations for a more joyful time, these don't make the hurts go away. And, I must admit, that right now, is a difficult time for many of us. There are a lot of things in our world that drain away our hopefulness, our good cheer.

As Bishop Rickels pointed out to us in his recent communications on the Rittenhouse and Arbury verdicts, we still have a long way to go in this country to deal with deep-seeded issues of race. These processes have also highlighted inadequacies in our judicial system, and all the work that still needs to be done to ensure that we do, indeed, have liberty and justice for all.

Closer to home, the homeless and unhoused populations continue to grow, as eviction moratoria expire and increasing numbers of people, including children, are pushed out into the wet, cold nights. The numbers we are feeding at the Refuel meals continues to rise, crossing over the 100 mark at our St. Anne's sponsored meal on the 19th. While

many of us are privileged to have homes, food and community, so many others lack these basics.

And something that sits heavy on my heart is all the COVID-related suffering. Going regularly into the COVID wards to sit with patients, communicating with families, supporting medical personnel who are drained down to nothing from months of unrelenting care, I have seen first-hand the devastation this disease has wrought. And not just this disease, but also the divisions within our society that have turned vaccinations and masks into political issues. Regardless of where you stand on these matters, I think we can all agree that too many lives have been lost, too many families have empty places at the dinner table, too many people continue to struggle for every breath.

With all of this, I am supposed to be preaching about hope.

And, as I stood in front of the nurses' station, listening to this earnest young woman explain her efforts to bring cheer to the people around her, I had a thought. Perhaps not an earth-shaking thought, or even a brilliant thought, but one I'd like to share with you today.

Several years ago, I heard a sermon on love where the priest suggested that we stop thinking of love as an emotion, and instead, to treat it as an action verb. We may not feel warm fuzzies for our neighbor, we may not even like our neighbor. Let's face it, some neighbors are pretty irritating. But regardless of how we feel inside, we can demonstrate love. We can act with kindness. We can provide support, and comfort, with pleasantness, even if we aren't really feeling it that day. And we can pray for God to share a bit of Her love for that person with us, when our own feeling of love runs dry.

So, if we can think of love, not just as a feeling, but as an action, perhaps we can do the same for hope. Now, I know that we don't "hope" someone the same way we "love" someone, but we can bring hope to someone, just as we can show love to someone. Rather than entering into that dark space of anger and frustration and, yes, hopelessness, we can instead turn toward the light of hope.

For ourselves, we can focus on the promises we have, that God loves us, that we are never alone, that as it says in Thessalonians, may the Lord make us increase and abound in love for one another and for all. Or as we hear in Luke, our hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." Even Jeremiah, the dreary prophet, gives us words of hope, that the Lord is our righteousness, capable of executing justice and righteousness in the land. Even on the dark days, we can call out these promises, we can see this spark, this light.

And we can be this spark, this light, this hope, for others. We may not be able to solve race relations tomorrow, or reform our judicial system overnight. We can't cure disease, end hunger, and provide housing to all in need.

But we can take little steps, begin with little sparks, to spread hope in our families, in our communities, in our church. Here at St. Anne's, we provide safe space, showers, laundry, mail and kitchen facilities, electricity, sanitation and wifi, to people living in their cars—that is one spark of hope. We provide food through our little pantry, and to even more through the Refuel program. That is another spark, or two, of hope.

We care for each other. We uphold each other. We pray for each other. We provide comfort, and community, and love—and yes, sparks of hope.

I encourage you, as you go through this next week, to search out opportunities to bring that spark of hope to someone each and every day. Maybe it's a kind word to the parent in front of you at the grocery store, struggling with a toddler melt-down. That's a spark of hope. Maybe it's a cup of coffee for the frazzled person behind you in line at Starbucks. That's a spark of hope. Maybe it's a manna bag for the homeless person at the street corner near you. That's a spark of hope.

And with each spark of hope, with each act of kindness and compassion, that light of hope grows brighter. The warmth of hope spreads. And the fears, and confusion, and foreboding fade into the background, as we don't just feel hope, but we bring it.

Amen.