

Isa. 40: 1-11

Ro. 15:4-13

Luke 21: 25ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Movies in our time are described as action films, children’s fantasies, sci-fi/horror, or “chick-flicks, meaning they aim for the female population. In his “non-chick flick” *The Shawshank Redemption*, writer Stephen King tells the story of a man who is accused, convicted and exiled to prison for a murder he did not commit. The story follows Andy Dufrayne over a period of years as he is mistreated by the penal system and against all odds attempts to hold on to some semblance of normalcy in what is clearly NOT a normal setting. After he escapes he pens a letter to his best friend, Red, inviting him to join Andy once he, too, is released from incarceration in order to start a new life even in their waning years. Andy writes, “Remember, Red, hope is a good thing; maybe even the best of things. And no good thing ever dies”.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” is spoken to a people who know what prison looks, smells, and feels like. They knew what it was to live within a shadowy world where the things that had sustained them could not be accessed. They knew their past was not retrievable and had been altered. They knew the danger of losing hope, because without hope there is no vision for a future, and without a future there can be no true hope. So, these words come both to haunt them and as a welcomed companion and glimmer in their darkness. And pay attention to the fact that the very same words appear on Jesus’ lips today:” Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”. Here is a strange mixture of 2 realities. One is the recognition that the world is not permanent, self-sustaining, gradually moving to a state of perfection, or just full of warm, fuzzy experiences. And the second is that God promises to be present, sometimes hidden, and active even within all the mess that we call life.

Language is a beautiful and mysterious thing. It is amazing how the very same words can come to convey very different meanings, **depending on our relationship to the one speaking them.** I can look out and say to one of you, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you” and it carries one message. But, I can also say, “DON’T WORRY, I’LL TAKE CARE OF YOU”, and it will have a totally different connotation. “There will be signs in the sun...men’s hearts fainting...Heaven and earth will pass away” can be heard as both a threat, and also as a promise depending on where you stand. This apocalyptic imagery is language you and I are unaccustomed to using. The trouble is scripture is not in the least concerned with how we think things ought to be put—it merely announces a world at whose center is God and all else is seen in light of that truth.

It is very important that we hear these words, as with ALL SCRIPTURE, contextually. Without that they will be misheard, misinterpreted, and often misused. Apocalyptic expressions have an eerie and fearful quality to them. What gave rise to this way of speaking was dramatic and often painful shifts in the lives of people. Exile, failed economies, faulty leadership, pandemics—like the Plague—caused fear and a sense that the world was coming unhinged. Look sometime at the art of Bosch, in particular *The Final Judgement*, if you want to see how this fear became visualized. We are not really that different. Watch the TV and movie productions about traumatic and worldwide destruction by meteors or zombie invasions. Yes, they are intended to entertain, but they reflect an uneasiness about life as well. **BUT, in all religious apocalyptic literature there is an element of hope and promise which puts the collapses of life in perspective.** Make sure you do not miss that. Failure to hear the hope is what allows false prophets and loose cannons to hawk fear on people.

So today we have Isaiah and St. Luke’s narrative. Jerusalem, the eternal, is in jeopardy of facing the unthinkable—destruction. Babylonian and Roman power are the visible kingdoms running the world economy and military. So the question from their audience is where is this “Kingdom of God” which is supposed to be upon us? How are we to know God’s presence and where is hope to be found? Jesus likens the signs of the Kingdom to very simple things like the budding of a tree which requires that we take note of what is around us. The signs we hope for are sometimes rather illusive and hidden, but are here, nevertheless. And sometimes the signs are present and found in our disappointments and losses, and as painful as they are, they carry truth that we need to hear. I remember well coming back with Jo from several wearying days of hospital tests and visits and needing a simple break. I asked her what she would like to do that would be fun, and she asked to go to a movie. So, we headed to the local theatre, found a parking spot that was the first use of a handicap sticker, and started to the kiosk. It took several minutes yet in an instance the stark reality hit that things had changed and would never be as they had been or as I wished. “There will be signs” and these signs are an Advent reminder that the world is temporal and not eternal.

In this time of Advent, we encounter an element that is unsettling and threatens false security. When we become too comfortable and at peace and settle for things simply as they are, we forget there is the danger they will change. When we become too embedded in the way our world operates so that what is darkness and untruth masquerade as the acceptable, we are in that arena where things will not last. The mere hungering avarice of this time of year in which people come to believe that what they buy, how they wrap it, or what it costs will in the end actually make any lasting difference is an example of that earth which is under judgment even now. How many of our worlds pass away? Those who live under repressive regimes feel it. Don’t you not think that the people in Syria, North Korea, Somalia have a crystal clear understanding of what this means? Or the poor who are isolated and without support right here in Greensboro? And so do we when a job or relationship is lost or when dreams and wishes fail us. When those we trust betray us. It can be the world’s end.

But that very experience can also be a beginning. The Church exposes us to Advent to remind us that God always keeps his promises—“but my words will never pass away”. The world around us may seem to be disintegrating, but God does not absent himself from the mess. In a few weeks after Christmas we will be reminded with Simeon, “Lord let your servant depart in peace” or put another way, Now, Lord, you have kept your promise. The Christian life begins and ends in Promise. Luke is telling us that in Christ we have the final sign of God’s kingly rule. Who would have believed that on Good Friday? Yet it was not fear and chaos that ruled or mattered, but the fact that God was there. No crisis could ever happen where that promise was not present. Advent forces us to ask how we look at our world. Is it a grim place with no significant past or future, where only our present experience counts? Or are there signs for hopefulness?

Advent reminds us that what we anticipate is important. It also reminds us that what we look forward to is not what we have created, but what God has promised. We live by the power of promise.

When I was a small boy, my father for some reason known only to himself and the Almighty, decided he had a vocation to pastoral ministry. So off we went as watchers of theological education and work. Now one thing you must realize is that the children of clergy are all expected by the parish to be the best behaved, while at the same time everyone knows they will likely be the worst. I did everything within my power to live up to the latter of those expectations! Talking too much in school, terrorizing my sister, tying shoe laces together under the pews were activities I knew well!! My father decided to take matters

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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into hand and probably seeing needs not apparent to others he promised me that every Friday afternoon after school we would spend a couple of hours together doing whatever I wanted; fishing, playing ball, etc. There are 2 things I remember about that. The first is that my father never broke that promise. The other is the effect of that promise on me. Monday and Tuesday I was my usual self. But by Wednesday I began to alter my behaviors, and by Thursday and Friday things were different. It was not until I became an adult that I realized the gift I had been given. My father taught me the impact of a promise; an event out in the future, yet to be fulfilled and nevertheless having the power to come into the moments before it occurred and to make those look different. We live not by our own wits, or by what we expect God to be like, but rather out of hope that is grounded in his promise in Christ to heal and make all things new, even us. "Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe even the best of things. And no good thing ever dies". "My word, my activity in your life, will never pass away." Advent invites us to place our trust where hope is really provided. Amen+