

## **RE-MEMBERING HOPE**

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-10

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Mary Marple Thies  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – November 28, 2021

If you have been out shopping this weekend, you might have shown up this morning expecting Christmas carols and stories of angels and stars. Muzak is playing carols in grocery stores, garland and bows are hung in the malls, and inflatable Santas are showing up in yards. I am sorry to dash your expectations, but perhaps after hearing this morning's readings you may have already figured out that the church, once again, is being counter-cultural. While the world outside these doors seems to be about to ready to arrive at Bethlehem, we are singing somber Advent hymns and are draped in deep purple. We, the people of God, are being reminded that our hope is not to be found in cheery tunes and gifts under the tree. Our hope is to be found in God.

The words of Jesus are particularly appropriate this year, don't you think? Listen again. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on 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."<sup>i</sup> Sounds like he is reading the headlines, doesn't it? Natural disasters, political upheaval, plague, violence, fear. These words were the last teaching of Jesus before his passion. After this, he only speaks words of farewell to his disciples, a few words at his trial and a few more from the cross. In anticipation of his coming death, these words challenge Jesus' followers to look ahead, to focus not on the immediate threat, but on the Day of the Lord, the establishment of God's justice on earth. Jesus challenges them to consider history set in the context of God's purpose and to look for hope in the midst of the traumatic.

Bessel van der Kolk is a psychiatrist who began his practice working with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. His first patient came seeking treatment for terrible nightmares and was prescribed medication to make the nightmares go away. When he returned, two weeks later, he was asked how the medication had worked. The vet replied, "I did not take your medicines.... I realized I need to have my nightmares, because I need to be a living memorial to my friends who died in Vietnam." That was the beginning of Dr. van der Kolk's work into how trauma affects the body and the mind. He describes people suffering the effects of overwhelming experiences like war or rape, whose traumatic memories are continually relived. They become living testimonials for traumatic things that no longer exist. They continue to hold onto those things and experience them again and again in their hearts and minds, bodies and brains.<sup>ii</sup> Living testimonials for things that no longer exist.

In some ways, it feels like we are a bit like those people. For the nearly two years, we have been traumatized. We have been hit with one thing after another—Covid, isolation and loneliness, racial unrest, political upheaval, economic fragility and growing division between the haves and the have-nots. Meanwhile, nature seems to reflect all that unrest in wildfires, floods,

and horrific storms. People around us are fearful, and so perhaps, are we. And this is what we hear so often—when will we get back to normal? When can we again go about our lives without all this fear and trepidation? When will all the unrest be settled? When we ask such questions, we are like living memorials to a normal that no longer exists.

It feels like we are standing on this shaky ground. Even if we have not experienced the worst of the tragedies, who have not lost jobs or homes or loved ones, we may be feeling vulnerable, traumatized, shaken, or, as Jesus put it, “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming.” So what are we to do? How are we to go forward? Where do we find the hope?

First, we need to understand what hope is. We are not talking about cock-eyed optimism or blind faith or wishful thinking. We are not talking about things eventually getting better or hoping against hope. Hope is not stoicism or hanging on til things improve, and it is not believing that we humans will finally find a solution for the world’s problems. So then what is hope? Jesus says our hope is in God, that in spite of the trials and tribulations, God is still in charge. Our hope lies in the promise that God’s own Son will come again bringing God’s new creation, that he will establish justice and peace, that all creation, including you and me, will be healed and made whole.

Jesus wasn’t making idle, pie-in-the-sky promises. He was talking to people then, and to us now, who know something about redemption. We know about God’s work in the Exodus in which the Hebrew people were freed from the bondage of slavery. We know about God’s presence with the Jewish people in exile in Babylon and then leading them home again. And most importantly, we know about God raising Jesus from the dead. We have a history of God working to redeem God’s people from trauma to healing, from slavery to freedom, from oppression to deliverance, from death to life. When God established the Passover celebration for the Hebrew people, they were told to remember the day that God brought them out of slavery.<sup>iii</sup> When Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, he told his followers to break the bread and share the cup in remembrance of him.<sup>iv</sup> We carry the memories of slavery and the death of Jesus, but, most importantly, we also carry the memories of exodus and resurrection accomplished by God. We remember the powerful acts of generosity and transformation by God, when all seemed lost. That memory produces hope, hope grounded in God’s steadfast love, compassion and faithfulness, hope grounded in God’s will and ability to work newness.

When Jesus told his followers of the disasters to come, he didn’t say to run and hide. He told them to pay attention because it meant that God’s new creation was near. In the midst of difficulty, we are to look for redemption. When the systems and structures we hold dear are challenged, we are reminded of the need for our world to be redeemed and to pray with the most passion for God’s kingdom to come on earth. In times such as these, we are drawn forward into God’s future.

And as we wait for the full redemption of the world, as we hold onto the hope of God’s future, we, God’s children are called to be the image, the faint shadow of that future. We are called to bear hope for the world, for all God’s children, for the hope that is ours is the birthright of every child, everywhere in God’s whole, wide, weary, wonderful world.

One story about this kind of hope. Mina Pachter was imprisoned in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia during World War II. She met regularly with other women in the camp and encouraged them to recall their recipes from memory. Those conversations provided a pleasant distraction from hunger, brutality and hellish conditions. They would huddle in the dark on freezing nights, often with nothing more than a piece of moldy bread or a some watery soup in their stomachs, and quarrel over techniques and ingredients for their recipes—butter or oil, cinnamon or nutmeg, stir or fold? Remembering the flavors and aromas and skills they knew so well, the women created recipes entirely from memory, scratching them out on scraps of Nazi propaganda fliers.

Mina Pacher died in the camp in 1944, but her handwritten, hand-sewn cookbook survived, carried out of the camp by some survivor and coming eventually to Mina's daughter 25 years later. Today those pages are preserved in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. More than a collection of recipes, it is a symbol of hope. Those women recorded their recipes as an act of defiance, an act of resistance to the dehumanization they faced every day, and a commitment to a future when people could again cook and be fed.<sup>v</sup>

The traumatized veterans were described by Dr. van der Kolk as living memorials to what no longer exists, people who have absorbed and continue to relive the horror that they experienced in the past. In contrast, God's people are called to be living testimonials to what does not yet exist. Our hope is the confidence we have in God's coming future and therefore we act upon it even before it is fully at hand. Our hope is an act of defiance to darkness and fear, an act of resistance to violence and division, a commitment to God's future, a commitment that allows us to see with clear eyes what the present reality is, to name how bad things really are and, yet, not despair. We know that God will have the last word, and as we wait for the fulfillment of God's future, we are called to live it out in present neighborliness.

Today we light the first candle in our journey through the darkness of Advent. As the days grow shorter out there and the nights grow longer, the light in here will increase. As we look at what is happening in the world, it may feel like the darkness is increasing, but we have hope. It is our vocation and our identity as the people of God. Hope is our job. We are called to be living testimonials to what does not yet exist, except in the mind of God. So when we lament the state of the world, let us not ask, "When will we get back to normal?" Rather, we hopeful people can look forward, asking, "How do we live out God's good future right now?"

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 21:25-26 (NRSV).

<sup>ii</sup> From an interview conducted by Krista Tippett, *On Being* radio program, November 14, 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 13:3.

<sup>iv</sup> I Corinthians 11:23-25.

<sup>v</sup> Peter W. Marty, "Receipes from Long Ago," *Christian Century*, January 2, 2019, p.3.