

Wake!

November 27, 2022

“How am I supposed to preach about Hope in the midst of all of this?” my friend lamented this week, after yet more violence in this country and across the globe. “Hope” is quite often the theme for the first week of Advent in churches who do liturgical things.

And so I suspect he was not alone in asking that question this week.

And yet, asking that question is kind of the whole point of Advent, as far as I can tell.

Advent is a waiting time. It's a penitent time. It's a time of sorting through the rubble to see if we can't piece together our remembrance of the inbreaking of Love into the world again.

Advent is not a time when we bathe in frothy and luxurious hope, but when we go looking for hope in all the nooks and crannies, determined to find it and salvage it.

*I am reminded of Emily Dickenson's poem that describes hope as the thing with feathers
'Hope' is the thing with feathers —
That perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —”*

- and the rebuttal by poet Caitlin Seida which is titled “Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It's a Sewer Rat.”

*It's what thrives in the discards
And survives in the ugliest parts of our world,
Able to find a way to go on
When nothing else can even find a way in.*

And I wonder which feels more accurate to you?

This year we are accessorizing the traditional themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love with themes drawn from the lectionary text that are perhaps a little edgier - that invite us to expand our imaginings about what these texts might hold for us. Or perhaps it is more helpful to say we are excavating around the themes we have used again and again to find out what else is there.

And our theme for this week, for Advent 1, for the “Hope” week” is Wake. Wake Up!

“We light this candle as we WAKE up to new understandings and new ways of living. We light this candle as we learn to HOPE,” we said together, earlier in the service.

What did you hear about “waking” in the scripture today?

I invite you to pull out your bulletin and spend some time with the artwork on the front. This artwork is from the Advent Packets given to our families with children this year so they can engage with Advent at home in the days and weeks ahead. Each week the artwork will be our bulletin art.

And so I invite you to look at it with special attention. What do you see there? What do you see that has to do with waking up? With hope?

Let's hear again, what the scripture said about "waking."

"Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to WAKE from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near," says the epistle - says Paul writing to the church in Rome.

And the gospel, Matthew, says "Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

Do you remember what the word "eschatological" means? The word means - having to do with the end of time. And so, we can take note that both of these passages are rooted in an eschatology that is imminent. Both of them understand that Jesus was going to return very soon.

So when, all this time later, we work on these passages, we get to ask what ELSE they hold. What is there for a people whose world view is not so rooted in the imminent return of Jesus?

I notice the "armor of light" imagery. "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," says Romans. And what might that look like? Let us live honorably as we would when everyone can see what we are doing - and not living dishonorably in secret. Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

We have a translation with a lot of formal words, but we know what is being named here. Being out of control, and lewd, and angry.

And we have to be careful not to get tangled up with the prosperity gospel. You may have heard of the dangers of the prosperity gospel, but I want to name the dangers of the prosperity gospel. There are those who will teach that this "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" is the test of our living as a faithful people. But that is just as dangerous as believing that Jesus lavishes wealth on faithful people.

What IS instructive, I believe, is the reminder that things that harm our bodies, and our communities, and other people, are not Holy. Actions, beliefs, ultimatums - nothing that harms can be holy. And we are called to wake up so that old habits and old ways of thinking fall away, so that we might dress ourselves in an armor of light against those harmful habits that hide away in the shadows.

The Isaiah passage offers some help in thinking about the newness that comes with living in the light “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Tools of violence become tools of sustenance. Old ways of being are redeemed when they are re-formed into something life-giving. We leave behind destructive beliefs and habits and put on light, and walk in the light.

That is our aim. Our calling. The redemption and re-formation to which we are summoned. Wake up! We are called to a new way of being, a new way of living, one that is no longer rooted in shame, one that is rooted in the power of waking from slumber.

But hope? Where is the hope? As we stumble toward the light, where is our hope? Is it calling to us on the wind, or scampering around the nooks and crannies?

The poet says:

*[Hope] is the gritty, nasty little carrier of such
diseases as
Optimism, persistence,
Perseverance and joy,
Transmissible as it drags its tail across your
path and
Bites you in the *ass. [Bum].*

That is, perhaps, the kind of hope we need. Hope that slinks along whatever sewers we find ourselves navigating, and infects us with light.

What might change for you when you are infected with optimism, persistence, perseverance, and joy? How might we live differently as those infected with light? From what slumber are we called?