

## DISCOVERING HOPE IN UNLIKELY PLACES

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**Texts: Luke 21:25–36**

On Thanksgiving, we attended the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service at Temple Israel. We closed out the service singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” which is known as the Black national anthem. It struck me when I sang the line, “sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,” that James Weldon and John Rosamond Johnson wrote the song in 1900, right after the formal start of Jim Crow segregation and oppression. What did they see in those dark days of violence, segregation, and discrimination against Black Americans that led them to write the poetry and melody that sings about hope in the midst of cruelty?

I think the Johnson brothers were demonstrating in their song what I call an Advent perspective. It was a perspective that knew that the hope of the present about which they sang may not have been visible in the laws, culture, and economics of the nation but was nonetheless signaled in the distress of a racist order fighting against their civil and human rights. It is that hope for better that does not depend on anything or anybody other than the faithfulness of God. It was a perspective of people who knew that there would be many more indignities, oppression, and lynching of Black bodies, but who also knew as a matter of deep faith that liberation awaited them on the other side. In the second verse of the song, they remembered that Black people had once felt the bitter chastening rod of slavery when their hope unborn had died, but they could sing in confidence that “God of our weary years and God of our silent tears . . . brought us thus far on the way.” The Senior Minister of Middle Church in New York City recently declared “Advent is a radical decision—hope against all evidence to the contrary” (Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis). To sing a song of hope in the middle of oppression is a radical decision. So they could stand up and raise their heads because in God’s time, even if not visible within human time, their redemption—their liberation—was drawing near.

In contrast, last year, there was a moment in the first months of quarantining because of COVID-19 when schools, businesses, and travel were all shut down and we had to figure out how to live and work outside of the hustle and bustle and routine of our busy-ness and economic strivings when people began to wonder what it all would mean for our way of life. There was also a moment in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the uprisings and community unrest that followed when some began to wonder if this would augur a reckoning with racial disparities and a reevaluation of how to be a multiracial society. It looked like the world was coming apart at the seams, that what was familiar and comfortable was giving way to the unknown and the uncertain. There was a lot of anxiety, division, and fighting. Pundits and commentators hoped out loud that we would take this opportunity to make real change. There was a sense that the lies and hypocrisy of the world were finally being exposed for all to see, that poverty, oppression, and inequality were laid bare to be finally addressed. It was as if the Advent cry “Come, Lord Jesus” was on the tip of our collective tongues as the only answer to the chaos and confusion, fear and foreboding. But we did not cry out for God. After a while, things seem to settle down or at least we became adjusted to how things were and went back to business as usual. There now remains a fear and foreboding about the worries of life, and the earth and the nations remain in distress.

However, this season of the liturgical calendar allows us to put on an Advent perspective. We take this opportunity to read the signs rightly such that we do not rest in fear and foreboding at the cataclysm of a world going in the wrong direction. We do not search the ruins of earthly decline for our means of escape from doom. Rather, we face the truth about the horrors and injustices of a broken world, and we see the wreckage that fear and violence leave in their wake. So we look to God. We remember that God is faithful and has promised a new heaven and a new earth. We stand up and raise our heads, for surely God in God's faithfulness will do something.

In our text today, we get an idea of what the posture for Advent can look like. Jesus sought to remind his disciples and followers that the increasing hostility toward him, the plot to kill him, the destruction of Jerusalem, the natural disasters and cosmic disruptions that are sure to come, and their persecution and imprisonment should not be taken as indication that all is lost or that the work they had done was in vain. These are the signs that the present age is passing away and God's promised reign is upon them. Jesus likens it to the experience of seeing new buds of a fig tree . . . it is a sign that a new season is upon them. So there is no need to be anxious about life or pessimistic about what is going to happen. Instead, it is a season to be alert, to prepare for the warm blossom of summer and the bright glow of new beginnings.

Jesus did not share this prophecy for the sake of painting a bleak future without hope. This was not an attempt to frighten his hearers into discipleship or to recruit more followers. Jesus spoke about the reality that befalls a world wedded to the status quo and invested in business as usual of poverty, inequality, and self-indulgence. This is the reality of a world inhabited by people unable and unwilling to love, serve, and embody God's reign. So when these things happen, when the world doubles down on its weakness, failure, and faithlessness, stand up and raise your head, for this is just the last gasp of an old age passing away. God is coming in all power and glory to make things right. This is the hope that prevails—envisioning and preparing for God's promise of healing, transformation, and liberation.

It is not lost on me that there is dissonance and ambivalence in being invited to stand up and raise our heads in anticipation of liberation when the world is shaken, confused, and chaotic. It's hard to look at our weakening democratic institutions; a deadly, global pandemic that continues to spread and mutate so easily; a polarized polity that appears to be more comfortable with using violence against their neighbors; and ecological devastation that warms the planet and destabilizes nature violently and not worry that the world is surely coming apart at the seams.

But this prophecy is not given to us to stoke fear and anxiety about the fate of the world. This word is not given to us to overwhelm us or to prepare us for the end-time drama of the apocalypse. Jesus did not share this prophetic word so we could use our technology and self-sufficiency to prevent the world from falling into a dystopian hellscape. This word is not revealed to us so we can change the world before it's too late. It was never the goal or intention of Jesus that we change the world. On the contrary, this an invitation to a hope that comes from embodying a change within the bears witness to the good news of God's liberation. It is an invitation to a hope found in discipleship that knows that God's vision is for our liberation, not the world's destruction. This is more than some vague optimism that things will work out somehow. No, it is hope born of trust in a God who promises to do a new thing, including within each of us.

So, we worry not about if this is the end or how it will all end. We worry not about if the human race will survive or if the earth will survive our profligacy and exploitation. We worry not about how to get ours while the getting is good or about our one last hurrah before the lights go out. But we sing a song of hope—real hope—a demonstration of our trust that God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth lies on the other side of the morass . . . an embodiment in our discipleship trust in the promise that God will act, that God will be true to God's covenant to do a new thing. So during this Advent season, I want to invite us on a journey of discovery, in which we read the signs of fear and foreboding in this world to find unwavering hope in God's promise of liberation. I'm inviting us to make the radical decision to hope. We stand up and raise our heads, bearing witness to the good news when all else seems lost.