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Advent 1C: Jeremiah 33:14 – 16, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-38

When apocalyptic confronts us, stand up and embrace hope

*Lord may the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be acceptable to you now and always.
Amen.*

Happy New year!! Well happy new church year!! Today is the first day of Advent, the first day of the next year in the 3 year cycle of lectionary readings, another year when we tell the story of Jesus Christ, his birth, teachings, death and resurrection. Over the next 4 weeks we will be building up to the birth of our Lord, beginning to build a picture of what this might all be about. It is the season of expectancy and waiting for the coming of the Lord. On this day when we begin to reflect on new beginnings it is a little strange to be confronted in the gospel with the idea that “Nothing lasts forever.” Just about everyone would agree with that. Whether it's a mountain, a distant star or your favourite shirt all things eventually fade and are no more. Scientists predict that the world itself will one day stop spinning on its familiar axis and it will all be over. The question that has worried many people through the ages is when?

Religious thinkers and doomsday prophets have predicted the end of world not just a couple of times but near countless times before - over thousands of years, by millions of people. The problem is however widespread the belief, however devout the believer, however precise the calculations, however unshakable the certainty, they have all been wrong. Perhaps you remember the flurry of prophecies around the turn of the millennium. Do you remember the Y2 computer scare? Did any of you actually have friends who stocked up on bottled water and installed generators? Such frenzied and fearful activity seems to go on all the time as people look at the signs around them and take on board predictions of the end of things as we know them. What then are we to make of the apocalyptic writing in the bible?

I want to take as my text the verse that says, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is at hand”.

It is a verse that acknowledges that there are indeed signs around us that give as grave cause for concern but it also contains a seed of hope that encourages us to “Stand up”, to not cower in fear, because our redemption is on the way.

Apocalyptic writings can paint a picture of the end of the world, a world without hope, where the powers of good and evil are ranged against each other, and humanity waits helplessly for the outcome and their fate. It is a type of writing that mixes current events with future predictions. The calamity of the gospel writer's time was the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Romans. In the history of the Jewish people this was a calamity of cosmic proportions.

In our day we too have signs of apocalyptic calamity. Unlike many of the predictions about the end of the world over the centuries our current crisis has the overwhelming backing of science. Due to global warming, pollution, overpopulation, erosion of topsoil and countless other problems, we could really be looking at the end of humanity and even of most sentient life. As one theologian puts it, "This is the awful truth that we have yet to recognize: We are living in an apocalyptic time disguised as normal, and that is why we have not responded normally". We are like the frog who if you place it in a pot of hot water, it will automatically hop out. However, if you place it in a pot of cold water and slowly bring it to the boil it will sit there and die. Like the frog we do not have a true sense of what is going on. We homo sapiens are witnessing the greatest annihilation of species in the last 65 million years, and our children may live to witness ecocide with their own eyes.

Apocalyptic visions like those in the bible and in our newspapers and science journals have the positive function of scaring the living daylights out of us. They are a wake up call to have hope, to stand up and raise our heads, to take action. Apocalyptic writings are there to warn us and encourage us. They are written in order that what they say will **not** become true.

One of the things that strikes the reader about the apocalyptic writing in today's gospel is the fact that God is in no way involved. The calamities, the signs threatening humanity, are purely derived from human decisions and actions. As such human beings can make decisions and take action that will reverse the trend.

In our situation we have a window of opportunity to make sure the apocalyptic vision of ecocide does not come true. We not only have a window of opportunity, amazingly enough we also have the technology and the knowledge to make it happen.

Does this mean that our salvation depends solely on us? In one sense it absolutely does. I for one do not believe God will descend in a chariot and fix all the mistakes we humans have made. For one that would be

violating the gift of freedom that the creator bestowed upon us. In the sense that we are free, creative, capable beings who have the power to make the changes and make the difference our salvation does depend on us.

However, part of the reason we can stand up and raise our heads is because of Jesus Christ and the redemption he promises. Advent is about waiting for the coming of Jesus but it is not just about the future. It is about the past: when Christ was born at Bethlehem; It is about the present: that Christ may be born again in our lives now; and it is about the future: when Christ will come again. Our redemption is not just about eternity and heaven, whatever that is. Our redemption takes place wherever and whenever we accept the coming of Christ into our hearts. This redemption brings forgiveness and freedom from what binds us but it also brings the Holy Spirit. Then the process of transformation really begins. Then, if we choose, the power of God can work through us to effect redemption on a social and ecological scale. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians the power of God working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

Redemption is here and now if we but open our hands and hearts to receive it. That is why we can with confidence stand up and raise our heads. One reason I am so personally confident about all of this and not just saying it is because of what I owe to God in my own life.....

It is at this place that the Christian virtue of hope is so important. Optimism will not get us up out of our bunkers and taking action. Optimism is a state of mind that believes things will get better and as such it accepts the status quo. In contrast, genuine hope is always "hope against hope". It begins where optimism has reached the end of its tether. Hope is a virtue that sees things as they truly are yet trusts that somehow, someday, God's power working in them will turn things around.

Hope is no mere wishing for something more. It is a conduct of life, a mode of living and acting. That is the reason it is called a virtue, a virtus, a capacity to act well.

One of my favourite movies is the Shawshank Redemption. It is the story of a man, Andy, wrongfully imprisoned. But he never gives up hope. He never accepts his unjust fate and he inspires his gaol mates with his courage and humility. When he realizes he is never going to be granted justice even when he has incontrovertible proof of his innocence he begins the long process of escaping. Over 20 years he tunnels his way out of prison and escapes to a new life in Mexico. There is a line in the movie when his best friend Red

says, " I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it is in my dreams." This wishful thinking becomes reality when he takes his own steps to make it happen. Fulfilled hope is always hope in action.

One of our symbols for advent is going to be a set of paintings, the first one is up there already. In case you are wondering what it is, it is a seed, planted in the ground. If ever there was an act of hope right now it is planting a seed waiting for it to germinated and grow. But that is what hope is...we see the signs around us but because we have trust and faith in the Lord of life we stand up and raise our heads, just like the seed will stand up and begin to raise its head.

All around us are signs and indications that all is not well in our world. One choice is to bury our heads in the sand and pretend bad things are not really happening. A favourite option is to believe there is nothing we can do anyway. Advent says to us "wait a minute, just around the corner, just nearby, is redemption. Stand up, raise your heads, have hope, act with courage – Jesus Christ is coming". Amen.

On the first banner, for Advent 1, I placed a sprouting seed in the earth, symbolic of the possibility of hope surging upward toward the light of day.

On Advent 2, the sprout appeared above the earth as two tiny dark green leaves — the messengers of hope — spoke of greater things to come.

On Advent 3, the seed had shrivelled and disappeared, but the roots had developed and the plant had grown. A bright red bud now appeared on the plant — the commitment to hope.

Advent 4 represented the fulfilment of hope. This coincided in the readings with Mary's visit to Elizabeth and the majestic, soaring Magnificat. The flower bloomed.