Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

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WHAT ARE WE HOPING FOR? Amos 5:12–24

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Matthew 25:1–13

The passage read this morning from the prophet Amos is fascinating. In it, the prophet re-interprets in a startling and radical way the common understanding of a phrase used often in the Hebrew scriptures, namely: “the day of the Lord.” The ancient Jews understood the “day of the Lord” as the day when God would intervene to put Israel at the head of all the nations, irrespective of their faithfulness. God would come to defeat Israel’s enemies and make things right. Amos the prophet had a different thought. Because Israel had sinned, on the day of the Lord the Sovereign God would come not to vindicate Israel, not to make things right, but would come instead in judgment upon the people. The lightness they expected would be darkness; the brightness they anticipated would turn out to be gloom. It would be like fleeing from a lion only to be met by a bear. It would be like going into a house, resting a hand against the wall only to be bit by a snake.

“Be careful for what you hope for,” one might say. What we hope for may not turn out to be what we get. So the question I would have us ask ourselves today is: “What are we hoping for?”

Many Christians these days are making the same mistake as the ancient Jews. They hope for the second coming of Christ, when they alone will be saved and taken into heaven. Among them are the Christian Zionists. Christian Zionists believe that all of the Holy Land, every bit of it, must be part of the State of Israel before Christ can come again. That is why they are so supportive of Israeli efforts to establish Jewish settlements in the West Bank and take over all Palestinian lands. So it’s perfectly OK for Israel to curtail Palestinian autonomy and oppress the Palestinian people. These Christian Zionists believe all of the Holy Land must belong to the Israeli Jews and to no one else. When this takes place, Christ will come again.

In the same way that the ancient Jews looked to the Day of the Lord as a vindication of Israel against all its enemies, Christian Zionists look to the Second Coming of Christ as a vindication of Christians against all their perceived enemies.

If this is our hope, then everything else other than the Second Coming of Christ will not concern us very much. Critical issues such as hunger and homelessness, climate change, the disparity between the rich and poor in our society, or the health care crisis will take a back seat in our Christian witness. We will focus primarily on Christ’s return.

For this reason, in the past I have not taken much interest in the Second Coming of Christ. Our communion liturgy from the UCC Book of Worship contains this declaration of what we believe: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” Yes, “Christ has died” and “Christ is risen,” but as for “Christ will come again” — well, perhaps not so much.

And yet . . . and yet . . . I am now beginning to realize that I may have shortchanged the whole notion of the “end time”—that time when all things will be made right. This is what the Second Coming is really all about— it is not about that time when Christians only will be vindicated. To be truthful, the vindication of the followers of Christ was John of Patmos’s hope when he wrote the Book of Revelation. Let us remember, though, that he wrote his book when he was a prisoner of the Roman Empire. But can we not instead think of the Second Coming as that time when all things will be made new, or in the words of the prophet Isaiah and even in the Book of Revelation, that time when God will create new heavens and a new earth? Truly, this promise is the ultimate source of our hope.

New heavens, and also a new earth— we focus on the heavens but what about the new earth? What would that look like? Isaiah the prophet dared to describe it – it will be as a new Jerusalem, a place where no more will there be in it the sound of weeping or the cry of distress. It will be a place where no longer will an infant live but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. It will be a place where they shall build houses and inhabit them and plant vineyards and eat their fruit. It will be a place where they shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, and yes the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and none shall hurt or destroy on all of God’s holy mountain. (Isaiah 65:17ff) Surely, this is something for which to hope.

As for the Second Coming of Christ, I think it is very important to go back to the life and ministry of Jesus, for what he did in 1st century Palestine is a foretaste of how things will be should he come again. And what did Jesus do when he walked and lived among humankind? Well, let’s see. The way Terry Eagleton describes Jesus in his book, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution[[1]](#footnote-1)* includes the following: Jesus owned no property. He was homeless and socially marginal, disdainful of his own kinsfolk. He had no trade. He was a friend of outcasts and sinners. He had no fear for his own safety. He was critical of traditional authority, a thorn in the side of the Establishment, and a scourge of the rich and powerful. And the morality he preached was reckless, extravagant, over-the-top: forgive your enemies, give away your cloak as well as your coat, turn the other cheek, love those who insult you, walk the extra mile, take no thought for tomorrow—this is what he preached. And how did he end up? Well, let’s see—he ended up as a tortured and executed political criminal, who died in an act of solidarity with what the Bible calls the *anawim,* meaning the destitute and dispossessed, the scum of the earth.

That is who Jesus was, and this is the Jesus who for us is the Christ. And so, my friends, if we hope for his Second Coming, there is no assurance that he will be that different should he come again. And why was Jesus the way he was? I like to think that he wanted God to make things right. He wanted God to lift up the poor and the lowly. He lived for a world in which divisions between human beings would cease, a world in which hunger and poverty would be no more, a world in which all would live in peace and unafraid. My God, for such a world we hope.

And yet . . . and yet . . . we cannot only hope for such a world. We must do all we can to embody that new heaven and earth in our present-day mission and witness as followers of Christ. Our hope for a new heaven and earth cannot help but propel us into faithfulness here and now.

It’s not enough just to hope for a time when all will be well. Through the prophet Amos, God declares that religious sacrifices and religious festivals are no longer acceptable. In truth, God hates them, despises them. What God desires is clear:

*. . .let justice roll down like waters,*

*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

—Amos 5:24

In a time such as ours, when everything is out-of-sorts, when worshippers in Sutherland Springs, Texas, both old and young, are murdered within their church home, when the homeless of our community must constantly be on the move, when families struggle to keep things together, when distrust of political leaders and religious institutions is at an all-time-high, we dare not abandon hope for Christ’s return, for that new heaven and earth promised by God. And we dare not abandon our ministry and mission here and now.

Our hope is not for our own vindication or salvation. Let us leave that up to God. Our hope is for a new heaven and an earth made new, and for justice and peace for all of God’s children. And our work and witness here and now, by God’s grace, will be a foretaste of all that we hope for.

My sisters and brothers, let us keep our hope alive. As Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, we do not know when the day of the Lord will come, but it will most likely come as a complete surprise. We therefore must not fall asleep. We must stay awake and alert. Like the wise bridesmaids in today’s parable from the Gospel of Matthew, we must keep our lamps trimmed and burning, for we know not when God will bring about what God has promised.

Let us, then, hold fast to God’s promises, even as we carry out our ministry and mission in these tumultuous days and as we look expectantly in hope for that day when God’s kingdom in its fullness will come on earth as it is in heaven. So be it. Amen.

1. Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 10ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)