Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

First Sunday of Advent

December 2, 2018

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AUDACIOUS HOPE Luke 21:25–36

Today marks the beginning of the Season of Advent, and each year in this season of preparation, the Gospel lessons move between the First Coming of Jesus some 2000 years ago, and the Second Coming of Christ, which is envisioned as taking place in the future. The early Christian community thought that Jesus would come again in the near future, but they were mistaken, and so it seems that we are still waiting for Christ to come again. The end of the present age and the beginning of a new has not yet taken place.

Gospel lessons such as this morning’s lesson from the 21st chapter of Luke describe the Second Coming. This section of the Gospel has been called “Luke’s apocalypse.” Please do not let the word “apocalypse” baffle you. The word simply means “revelation.” Apocalyptic literature serves as a revelation as to what will take place when Jesus returns to earth. Such literature is visionary and otherworldly. We do not need to take the words literally.

The important thing to remember is that apocalyptic visions arise when life is difficult and when despair is an ever-present temptation. Those for whom the Gospel of Luke was written faced profound suffering and turmoil. They lived in the aftermath of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. They were facing increasing hostility from the Jewish religious community and persecution from the Roman authorities. They were struggling to maintain their small communities. Apocalyptic visions were for them a source of hope and also a protest against the way things were. No matter how difficult life had become, Jesus would come again, and with his coming God would make all things new. One only needed to contemplate the budding fig tree to know that a new heaven and a new earth was just on the horizon. Do not give up, the Gospel urged. Do not give into your worries. Do not despair, but be alert at all times. Live with the expectation that Jesus will come again.

Now, if we are honest with ourselves, those of us who call ourselves liberal, progressive Christians do not quite know what to do about the Second Coming let alone the first. We would prefer to leave such matters in the hands of fundamentalist Christians. Let them fuss and fume over the literal interpretation of the Second Coming. We have instead opted to settle for what we can do in the present to embody the Kingdom of God. We have replaced our future hope in a new heaven and earth brought about by God with notions of social progress in the present. Let’s do what we can here and now. A popular Roman Catholic worship song declares:

*Not in the dark of buildings confining,*

*not in some heaven, light years away–*

*but here in this place the new light is shining;*

*now is the kingdom, now is the day.*

Forget the future. Only the now, only the present counts.

The problem is, however, that this exclusive focus on the present moment and human progress isn’t working. Oh, yes, there are victories here and there, such as the end of slavery here in America and the end of apartheid in South Africa, but these only seem to be replaced by ever mounting problems. Now we are facing unprecedented homelessness in our own community, and nationally, we are filled with the fear of terrorism, the rise of white nationalism, and a growing enmity between Christians and Muslims. Racism is on the rise once again, and our earth itself continues to suffer more and more from global warming. Immigrant children are separated from their parents and hundreds of immigrant youth are being held in detention. As a prayer of confession from the United Church of Christ Book of Worship puts it:

*Merciful God,*

*we know that you love us*

*and that you call us*

*to fullness of life,*

*but around us and within us*

*we see the brokenness*

*of the world*

*and of our ways.*

*Our successes leave us empty;*

*our progress does not satisfy.*

*Our prosperous land*

*is not the promised land*

*of our longing . . .*

Yes, we try to do our best to make things better here and now, but honestly, we get tired. We lose our hope for a newness that only God can bring. Our tiredness is what happens when we abandon our hope in that new heaven and earth, which will brought about by God and not because of anything we can do.

Walter Brueggemann, Sallie McFague, and others have linked our faith in human progress to the ideology of consumerism. The problem of consumerism, they say, is that it focuses our attention on the present at the expense of the future. We consume more and more not caring what it is doing to the earth’s long-term wellbeing. What matters is what we can purchase here and now. The church’s observance of Advent, with its focus on God’s coming in the child of Bethlehem and the need to watch and wait for the age to come is dwarfed by the frenzy of Christmas shopping and all the hype that goes with it. It’s all about instant gratification.

I would also suggest that consumerism serves to cover over our own despair and the underlying hopelessness of our age. Let us realize that the members of the early Christian community were overwhelmed by the realities of oppression and injustice in their lives. Let us continually remind ourselves that their apocalyptic yearnings for a new heaven and a new earth were given birth in the midst of their suffering. The early church’s apocalyptic visioning was protest, a protest against suffering and oppression.

And what of our own time? The suffering of so many in our world and in our own community is palpable. The suffering of the poor is open and obvious for all to see who have the eyes to see. But there is another despair, a despair that is hidden in those of us who belong to the middle and upper classes of our society. This is the despair that was identified by Soren Kierkegaard as the despair that “does not even know that it is despair.” This is the hidden despair present in many of us. This is the “dis-ease” we feel as we read the daily newspaper and watch the national television news. This is the deep feeling that what is will always be. What we desire will never come. Truly, we who are immersed in hidden despair are also in need of hope.

There is no amount of faith in human progress, or shopping or consuming that can dispel despair, open or hidden.

I close with a scene from one of my favorite films, *The Shawshank Redemption.* In this movie, suffering and despair fill the screen. The story is set in a dreary and cruel prison. In one scene, in an act of defiance, the character played by Tim Robbins locks himself in the room containing the public address system for the prison. He puts on the loudspeakers all over the prison and plays a recording of a duet from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*. This music is heard by the prisoners not just as an exquisite piece of music by Mozart. It is music from another world. One of the inmates says:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies

were singin’ about. . . . I like to think they were

singin’ about something so beautiful it can’t be

expressed in words, and makes your heart ache

because of it. I tell you those voices soared, higher and

farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It

was like some beautiful bird flipped into our drab little

cage and made these walls dissolve away . . . and for

the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank

felt free.

My sisters and brothers, we need that kind of music in our lives. We need that vision of a new heaven and new earth. We need to continue to profess, as we do in our communion liturgy: “We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming again.” We need to keep hope alive in our hearts, in our waiting, and in our doing. We don’t have to take all those visions of a new heaven and a new earth literally. But we are invited to place our hope in the new creation God has promised. So will our despair be transformed into courage and our weariness into confidence. And so will we with Julian of Norwich proclaim: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall we well.” Thanks be to God. Amen.