

Allowing Hope to Shine

Ad 1 Yr B Mark 13:24-37 November 29, 2020

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This has been a discouraging week. The number of Covid 19 cases surged in NS, restrictions we haven't seen since March arrived for Halifax, and the Atlantic Bubble burst. So as we move into December there is worry and concern about what the rest of the month will look like not just in HRM but here as well. We don't know what we will be dealing with as December progresses. Yes, there is some excitement as we look to Christmas but honestly there is a great deal of uncertainty and worry as well.

And into that mix of emotions we start the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, when we prepare ourselves for the arrival of Jesus into our world. We begin this time by considering hope and what it means to us in our lives and in our world. And we start these four weeks by reading scriptures which speak not of mangers and angels but the end of time and the need for us to be ready.

And while it may not seem like it at first the truth is that those two things, the hope of Advent and the gospel about end times, actually fit together to show us that Christmas isn't simply about celebrating something that happened long ago but to see how God is working in our lives now as we anticipate and prepare for what is coming.

Because honestly there is no need for us to hope about what has already happened. We don't hope about the past but rather we hope now about what is going to happen. And yes of course in this season we look back to the nativity and the difference that made in our world. We want to hear that familiar, comforting, and meaningful story.

But the power of what we remember and celebrate this season isn't simply that Jesus' birth made a difference two thousand years ago but that the arrival of the Saviour, the promise of God taking flesh and walking among us, continues to make a difference in our lives and in our world this day. For what God does in Jesus, what God does by sending a Saviour to show us the way to live and save us from sin, continues to have meaning and importance in our lives today and in the days to come. And all of that informs our understanding of hope.

Hope shines when we recognize that God has not forgotten us in our difficulties but

is moving in the world. Hope shines when we rejoice not just at what God has done but in what God will do. Hope shines when we realize that what God has promised, what God is planning, is taking place around us now.

Our gospel lesson is filled with weird images of darkened sun and moon and stars falling and heaven itself shaking. Now you can take that literally and watch for those things to take place in the skies. Or you can see that in this past year things have been turned upside down and our safe comfortable dependable life, what we knew and expected and took for granted have been shaken to the core.

Which is what Jesus is really talking about. Because at its heart doesn't the sun refusing to shine and the stars falling mean that what we expect, what we trust to always be the same, suddenly changes and what we rely on and assume is thrown into chaos and becomes something we have never seen before?

And the lesson tells us that in those times, when the world makes no sense and nothing is normal, that we can trust in the promise of God. The promise that God is not simply working to end our troubles and a return us what was but that God is bringing about something new, making something better out of the anxiety and uncertainty of our world. That we who have been fearful and afraid will be guided to something new, something better for our lives. For God has not forgotten us, not forsaken us, but is moving us toward the end of what we have always known to the start of something new.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near” a short little verse buried in the middle of our lesson that reminds us that there are signs, hints, that we can see in our world to understand that the change is coming. And when we see those things we don't know how close the new thing is but we can hope, we can believe, we can trust, that change for our lives and world is on its way.

Now part of hope involves watching for the indications that something better is coming. For us I think it is probably the example of other places in the world who have entered a lock down earlier this fall and endured the two weeks or month and been able to stop the spread of Covid. Or the news that different vaccines are having good trial results which means that when they arrive sometime in the future we're going to be able to put the pandemic behind us.

But the other part of hope is faith. It's trusting not in what we can see but in what God has promised us. It is relying not on what we can do but on God's love and grace. And while this is perhaps the hardest part of hope the truth is I think it is also the most powerful. Because when we hope in God we rest in what God is doing, what God has done, and what God will do.

Now in our lesson we are reminded we don't know how much longer we have to wait for things to change. None of us can know the hour or the day. But let's never forget that what God has promised will happen. Even if we don't know when. Even if we can't figure out how. God is faithful and God will bring us through this time. That's part of the reason we look back at Christmas to see what God has done so that we can look forward and trust in what God will do.

And that ties into the final part of our lesson about being awake. For the fact is that in faith we can't ignore what is happening in the world or turn away from it and pretend nothing has changed. We can't live like we have before. We can't slack off from what is expected and take a break because we have lots of time to do what needs to be done. No, the scriptures remind us we have to be awake, be active in our faith as we hope.

And what does that involve? That involves praying. Praying so that we can know the mind of God and so that our focus isn't on our own fears and worries but on other people and their needs. Praying so we turn our attention from ourselves to God and neighbor. Being awake in faith also involves service. Helping those around us. Reaching out with phone calls and messages. And in this time that also means being patient with ourselves and each other.

We hope when we believe and trust about God no matter how long we have to wait. We hope by praying, by serving, by actively and faithfully living. And when we do those things when we hope in that way we are lights shining in this gloomy and shadowed world.

For our hope is anchored in our faith and that means that when difficulties come and when things are discouraging we find the strength we need. We find the peace we need. We find the skills we need to pass through this time and make a difference in the lives of others. For we hope not in ourselves or in wishful thinking but we hope in God. And when we hope in God we are never disappointed.