

“Being Alert”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 2, 2018

Jeremiah 33:4-16

For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the houses of this city and the houses of the kings of Judah that were torn down to make a defence against the siege-ramps and before the sword: The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and to fill them with the dead bodies of those whom I shall strike down in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness. I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without human beings or animals’, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank-offerings to the house of the Lord:

*‘Give thanks to the Lord of hosts,
for the Lord is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever!’*

For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In this place that is waste, without human beings or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the places around Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

Luke 21:25-36

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us have within. I pray that you would take the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words we've heard read from scripture, and the words that you've placed upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word minister to us. And let that word minister to others through us. Let that word be Christ's presence in our lives and in our world, especially in this time of need. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So I'm not sure I got it right with the children's sermon that the reading for the first Sunday in Advent is kind of weird. Any of you come today thinking that you were going to hear about fear and foreboding, about all the horrible things that are going to come on the face of the earth? Or are there people here that want to sing Christmas carols? Okay. I see a few hands. Not for the fear and foreboding, of course, but for the Christmas carols. In a sense, we're kind of getting in the mood, right? We've got the wreaths. We've got the tree. We've got the Advent wreath up here. Everything is kind of moving us towards that moment where we get to celebrate the birth of Christ. And yet, we have this strange text that is offered to us on this Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. It's a text that comes to us right before Christ is crucified. And it's talking about how all these horrible things are going to happen, and that everyone needs to stay awake or be ready to notice when Christ comes again. It's my hope that by the end of this sermon, you will find some hope and goodness in this passage, and realize that there maybe was some rationale behind the idea to have this text from the 21st chapter of the gospel of Luke as our first reading for Advent. That's my hope. We'll see if it happens.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have a disposition that when things are going bad, I want to hunker down and hide. When I've had a bad day at church, I go home. I change into my jammies. I pull all the blinds. I take the purple blanket that the dog sits on and I fold it nicely and I put it on the couch. And I sit next to her and I have my glass of water. And I just breathe. And when my wife comes home, she knows that it's been one of those days, and she asks gently, "How was your day?" And I say, "Oh, it's wonderful." And she's like, "Yes. That's why you're hiding [laughter]." Because that's how I deal with all those difficult things. I hide in my comfort. And I think I came by this naturally because there's a long line of hidiers in my family. When I was a little kid playing hide and seek with my brother at my grandmother's house, I found the perfect hiding spot. And I may have shared this story before. But this spot was so perfect in their bathroom, they had an enormous closet that was really long, the whole length of a set of stairs because it was underneath the stairs. And so as you walked into the closet and got further towards the back, the ceiling just kept getting lower and lower and lower and lower. So as I walked in past the clothes and then sort of crawled past all of the little packages of jello, because if armageddon comes you need jello apparently, I got all the way to the back of the closet and back there I found a blanket that was kind of set aside and a pillow. And I thought this is perfect, my brother will never find me. And he didn't. I heard my grandmother's voice, "David, time for dinner." And as I came out and round the corner into the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table for dinner, I asked her, I said, "Grandma, I was hiding in the back of the closet and I'm curious, why is there a blanket and a pillow back there?" And without flinching, she turned around and said, "Well, that's where I sleep when there's thunder and lightning." In the back of the closet, all the-- I mean, all the way back there is where she hides when it's noisy and lightning is striking in the sky. So I come by hiding naturally and I'm quite proud of that connection to my paternal grandmother. This story is sort of about hiding and not hiding. And, to me, it's the invitation that comes to us in the season of Advent when there's so much stuff going on that maybe you're overwhelmed or you're feeling like you want to pull down the blinds and put on your comfy clothes and just tune the world out. I feel like this passage is telling us something about how Christ wants us to live in this season, into Christmas, and even beyond. Because the phrases that I took out of it were stand up and raise your head, be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down, be alert, at all times praying. And as I wrote all of these up on the whiteboard in my study at home, it just dawned on me there's this connection about stand up and raise your head, don't hunker down and put your head in the sand. Be on guard so that your hearts are weighed down. Don't let fear come and weigh you down and be all curled up but be up and be ready, look around. And then the last thing, be alert, at all times praying. All of that is great-- a great way to live in the midst of craziness that tries to come in and just pile up on top of us.

Now, like I say, I'm working at home on the whiteboard and I'm writing all these things out. Stand up. Raise your head. Be on guard. Be alert. Pray. And the phrase that comes to me is very megachurch-oriented. And I want to offer it to you. The phrase is, "Confident living in the midst of the craziness of life." Should have been probably the sermon title. Confident living in the midst of the craziness of life. That, to me, is this message that came from the gospel of Luke, the 21st chapter, at this beginning of Advent. And in a way, to me, confident living in the midst of the craziness of life epitomizes the invitation of the candle of hope. That in the midst of every dark thing that's trying to get you down or get you distracted or

get you worried or get you to be afraid, that candle of hope burning bright within you is that which you need to hang onto. Now, being the seminary-trained nerd that I am, I did not write *Confident Living in the Midst of the Crazyiness of Life*. I wrote *Confides Living in the Midst of the Crazyiness of Life* because *confident* comes from the Latin *confides*, which means with faith. So the invitation for us in this season of Advent and really every season of our lives is to live with faith and to not let things destroy you or pile on and get us down. Shortly after, I did that work. I think it was the day after. The Holy Spirit decided to stir things up and offer some illustration that was just too good to pass up for this Sunday.

I had a conversation with Jim Kirk, who is the director of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance National Response Team ministry that I was involved in for several years, and we were talking about the stuff that's going on in California with the wildfires. But after I hung up the phone, I remembered a story that he shared with me at one of our annual meetings, and it was several years after Katrina. But it was about a woman that he encountered when he was a chaplain at a Red Cross facility that they had set up. He told the story of a woman in New Orleans who, when the water started to come in and kept getting higher and higher, she just kept moving higher and higher in her house. First, it was the first floor that flooded very quickly. And then, it was the second floor that started to flood. So she took her bedding, her pillows, some food, cereal - I don't know why cereal, but I remember cereal - her cat, the cat food, and whatever else she could get, and she went all the way up into the attic of her house. And she was there for three days waiting for someone to come rescue her.

Jim told this story with amazement in his sort of eyes and heart because he said, "Then I asked her, 'What did you do for three days in the attic with the water rising?'" And she replied, "I prayed. I prayed." So in the attic of a flooded house in the aftermath of Katrina, in the heart of a woman stuck in her attic with her cat, stuck there for three days without any assurance that she would ever be found, that candle was burning within her: the candle of hope. The candle that is living with faith in the midst of all the crazyiness that life brought her way when we were on the phone, he was telling me about his trip out to California to be at another Red Cross facility that was accepting families from the Paradise community. He said one of the stories was of not a family directly but it was the neighbors of a family, they had been affected, but they were really, really concerned. Really concerned about their neighbors because they hadn't seen them, they hadn't talked to them, and they were starting to worry that they had been trapped and consumed by the fire. He said after a couple of days they came over and said, "Guess what, we found them." And through Facebook, they'd reconnected with their neighbors who had moved out and gone up to Oregon to be with a relative.

He said in the story that was relayed through the neighbors, the family, the mother of the family, told them that when the word came that they needed to get out they went to the closet that they never went to and instead of packing clothes or money or passports or those kinds of things. They packed the car with pictures and family albums and old movies and VCRs and photographs of the kids first birthday with the frosting all over their face as they sit in the high chair. And the family was saying what a wonderful thing to hang onto. When everything is destroyed, you can keep those memories alive by taking those things with you. Now I don't know if she actually did this, but I could imagine the mother and father of that family driving north on I5, leaving everything familiar behind, and I imagine the children sitting in that car asking questions as most children do of their parents. "What are we going to do, our house is gone, our clothes are gone, our school is gone, the store is gone, our ball fields are destroyed? What are we going to do?" And I can imagine that mom sitting in that car, turning around and telling those kids, "We've got each other, we're going to be fine." And as I imagine that the image that came was of a car driving up the freeway, making the transition from California to Oregon and there in the middle of that car was a candle that was burning, and it was the candle of hope.

I've seen some insane things in my life as a Pastor. Things that no human should have to endure on this Earth. I've seen parents have to deal with their children or even bury them. I've seen couples struggle to understand why they're disconnected from family members. I've watched husbands bury wives and wives bury husbands. And the one thing that I can say that through all of those things there always seems to be a candle of hope burning in the hurting person. Sometimes they can't see it. Sometimes you can't see it. Sometimes I can't see it. But it's there. And that candle is inviting us to live always with faith. With faith in the midst of the crazyiness of life. With faith in the midst of the business of the season. And with faith in the midst of the struggles that come our way. Brothers and Sisters, it is my prayer this Advent that all of us live with this faith and that this candle of hope, that burns within us, will guide us and teach us. Amen.