Sermon on Advent 1
(A Series of 3 Reflections – Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44)

Opening Reflection

***1st Voice: Why do we have Advent?***

***2nd Voice: “So we can do our Christmas shopping?”***

***3rd Voice: “So we remember to put up the Christmas lights and buy a Christmas tree?”***

***1st Voice: I’m pretty sure that’s not it; I’m remembering that “advent” is the Latin word that means “the Coming.” I think it’s about looking forward to the coming of Jesus.***

***2nd Voice: “But Christ has already come! What are we waiting for?”***

Indeed, what are we waiting for? Is it just that restless yearning for “things to get better;” that insatiable desire we humans have for, well, *more? More* security, more safety, more satisfaction.

Or is this the kind of waiting that complains and gripes about our society, about the state of affairs, maybe personal, like, I just need to get through this illness, or it might societal, when will we get a different political leader? All we can do is wait for something better, I guess.”

In contrast, Advent is the season bequeathed on us by the Great Tradition in which we are given the space to learn again, to continue learning what it means to “wait for the Lord,” to hear the words of promise, the summons to prepare ourselves for the Lord’s appearing and discern the difference between those things that seem to amuse us or distract us, those things that are clamoured after, those things we gripe about and those things, often small things, which genuinely begin to work away on us as we learn to wait on the Lord, as we learn, particularly on Advent 1, to hope for God’s appearing.

After the Second Reading

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares…neither shall they learn war any more…*

Really? Sentimental claptrap! Nothing exposes the difference between mere human optimism and deeply biblical hope then looking at the dream of a warless world, the dream of neighbour living with neighbour in peace, the dream of human flourishing as nations, as, together, we base our political wisdom on divine teaching.

Both optimism and genuine hope seem, at the beginning, to expect positive developments in the future but as the famous theologian Jurgen Moltmann has argued, they are radically different perspectives on reality

Optimism is based on cause and effect thinking and extrapolating it out. We draw conclusions about the future based on experiences from the past and present.

Since, for instance, since my sons seemed to take to reading at a young age, I could legitimately be optimistic that they would continue to read once they went to school.

But often we extrapolate wrongly; we’re optimistic based on the slimmest pieces of evidence. If, for example, I would have thought, “my son is a good at climbing things on the playground (which he was) therefore he’s going to become a world-famous explorer” my optimism would have been misplaced.

When I worked on the prairies I’d meet families that genuinely thought their son, the star of the midget hockey team, would one day become an NHL star; I didn’t have the heart to tell them to craft a better retirement plan!

Now, don’t get me wrong, the future will largely turn out to be a result of the causes of the past and present. Both good and bad will result from what has transpired in our past and present.

I’m optimistic that my growing wisdom based on my experiences will make a difference to my happiness as I get older, but I’m also realistic, my bones and body are slowly breaking down, I’m right to plan accordingly.

But hope is different, not the word hope which is merely a synonym for optimism in our common language use, but biblical hope; it’s not based on our experiences; genuine biblical hope is not based on whether we’re feeling optimistic or pessimistic, it’s not based on the possibilities of our situation; hope is independent of our present circumstances whether they be good or bad.

Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God. Hope is based on *God’s possibilities*, irrespective of our possibilities.

That means that hope can spring up even in the shadow of violence. When the author of our first reading was alive the northern Kingdom of Israel was toast, slaughtered, quartered and consumed by Assyria, there was no human reason for optimism, no Marshall plan, no United Nations looking out for their plight, no human possibility and yet precisely because of this, God’s possibilities, God’s promises could now come to the fore.

From the perspective of human optimism, nothing could’ve been more absurd than asserting that the Jerusalem would somehow become the center of the world’s wisdom, that an obscure kingdom of sheepherders, now being led away in chains, presumably never to be heard from again, would, in time not only regain their place but now witness the pilgrimage of the nations *towards them!*

It’s like life coming precisely because something is dead…wait, that’s a thing isn’t it? ☺

The God who created the universe, who freed Israel from Egypt, who raised Jesus from the dead, the possibilities resident in *this God* can generate light in the midst of darkness.

What passes for hope in our world, particularly in our Western world has very little to do with Jesus Christ. We’re drawn to public figures who spout platitudes and optimism because on a surface level they make us feel good.

The elixir they give us to drink tastes sweet but when we take the long view and realize that they’ve not told us the truth the last sips turn bitter.

Optimism thrives on the surface of things but often it’s an avoidance technique. It thrives within the context of youthful exuberance, strength; it’s the endorphin rush of something working out, of a project completed, of a balanced budget, a holiday on the beach and a “Merry Christmas” on a cold winter’s night.

But it’s fleeting. Optimism always crashes into the hard rock wall of reality. To quote the second president of the United States, John Adams “facts are a stubborn things.”

Never have we needed to understand this as much as we do today but what is less reckoned with is that we don’t usually want to face the facts, the fact of our life, of our age, of our diminishment. We can gain courage to do so when we begin to reckon with God who brings life from death

Reflection after the Gospel

The path from optimism to genuine hope is the paradoxical journey recognizing the hopelessness of our world, even the hopelessness of Christianity as it has participated in many of the things that have furthered injustice and violence.

The earth has a problem and humans are it! The earth has a future that can arise from genuine hope and humans, partnering with God is it!

As the Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar in the world N. T. Wright says, our gospel text is about what it means to live and work in our world when human effort is not enough

Just so we wait for the Lord; defined by Paul, not passively but as the massive, life-consuming effort of waking up, of becoming aware of how deadening “feel good optimism” really is.

If I can paraphrase Noam Chomsky, who I don’t always agree with, “feel good American optimism has led us straight into the teeth of empire!”

We are called to wake up “put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the merely surface desires that won’t satisfy us but will merely work to oppress others and rape the earth.”

In our gospel this waiting, this waking up is described as watchfulness and is defined by Noah’s patient activity of building the ark in the midst of a decadent culture; in the early church Noah’s labour was seen as a metaphor for building up God’s people, the Church. (point out roof)

Given what the Lord had told Noah, he certainly couldn’t have been optimistic, but the actions of his ordinary, daily life, even in the face of opposition was the fruit of hope and ended up being the salvation not only of his family but of the natural world.

Surely Noah could be our patron saint in a time of environmental stress and emergency!

Surely Noah and Paul demonstrate for us that genuine hope works from the deep character transformation that happens when we seek to be obedient to the Lord in the midst of difficulties.

Genuine hope comes from participating with God in the difficult task of building the Church and participating in its mission to rescue the world!

When we look at ourselves, and the smallness of our efforts, to imagine them mattering can seem as ludicrous as Isaiah’s vision.

But as we take up the tasks, one by one, the call to prayer, the participation in this community, taking our share of service, leadership, and, indeed, the joys and pain of working together, optimism is put aside and genuine hope in the Lord’s presence and promise begins to take hold in us.

And God’s hope, even as it takes us down through the valley of the shadow of death, will always come out upon that beautiful mountain where we learn war no more. Amen.