
Look out!
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

So this is the first Sunday in Advent. If you've been coming to church for awhile, you know what that means, right? It means we get to light Advent candles. And each one of the Advent candles has its own name. And the name of the first candle is hope. Well, that seems appropriate doesn't it? I mean, as we imagine getting ready for Christmas, many of us hope for things. We might hope for actual "things" like Christmas presents, or we might hope for reality to unfold the way we want, like hoping that everyone can make it for Christmas dinner or something like that. It is natural to have hope at this time of year. Hope does seem like a good theme to begin Advent.

But in some ways, as we move into Advent, it seem like hope should be week 2, not week 1. I mean why would we hope for anything at all if we couldn't imagine a better life, if we didn't have problems, if we don't want reality to be different. Surely hope is step 2, and step 1 should be recognition of our disappointments, frustrations, sadness, and pain. Wouldn't that make a nice Advent greeting card - "Have a happy disappointment"? But seriously, if our lives were perfect already, why would we spend any time on hope? What would there be for us to hope for? But don't worry, I don't want to discuss disappointment today, so we will stick to tradition and discuss hope.

Let's do a little thought experiment. I invite all of us to put our minds back about 2000 years, before Jesus was born. Now imagine what your life might be like. Now imagine that you are at work, or at home, or some other place. But put yourself somewhere concrete. If you imagined yourself at home cooking, think of what you are cooking. Soup? Perfect. What kind of soup. What are you doing? Are you chopping vegetables or are you stirring? Feel what there is to feel. Smell what there is to smell. If you are working outside, imagine the actually work. Perhaps you are planting a crop. Feel the dirt on your fingers. Smell the soil. Feel the warmth of the sun. Feel the breeze. Spend a moment in your imagination being present to your senses 2000 years ago, with

all the sounds and smells and sensations of whatever your chosen activity is. Live it. Make it real. Now imagine that you are hoping for something. What are you hoping for right now? What might normal working-class people like us have hoped for 2000 years ago? Think about that for a moment.

Now if you were making that soup, perhaps you hoped that it would taste good, or that your children would be home soon. If you were planting your crop, you might have hoped that your crop would turn out well, or perhaps you hoped that the weather would cooperate. Perhaps you simply hoped to finish the difficult task before the sun was at its strongest. Those are the sorts of things that normal people hope for. Now come back to the present.

In our traditional gloss over human history we often say that 2000 years ago, Jewish people were hoping for the messiah to appear - a hope that was definitely based on the recognition of disappointments and frustrations. At the time of Jesus, Jewish people were under Roman rule which they both benefited from and fought against. From Jeremiah today we read, “[the messiah] shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” The hoped for messiah was going to bring social stability and economic and political freedom to the people. And to continue our traditional gloss over history, Jesus came, and was received as the messiah, even though most Jewish people didn’t see things that way. Why did most Jewish people not recognize Jesus as the Jewish messiah?

There are 2 obvious reasons for that. One reasons goes back to our thought experiment. When I asked you to imagine what you yourself hoped for 2000 years ago, I’m sure that most of us were thinking about basic human needs, like soup, family, crops, weather. Not many everyday citizens were actively looking for a messiah on any given day. That job was left to priests. Just like today, we are all driven - most of the time - by the very present needs of the day, not by fantastical metaphysical speculations - that’s my job! Moreover, in his day, Jesus didn’t actually make much of a splash, traveling around visiting people in smaller villages with his tiny group of friends. I know you might not believe this, but all this “Jesus stuff” happened before Twitter. Really! That’s a shame really - I’d love to see an Internet “flame war” between Jesus and Donald Trump. But the

reality is that during Jesus's life his ministry really was a small thing and most Jewish people never heard his name. 2000 years ago, Jewish people did not reject Jesus - they just never heard of him.

The other reason that Jewish people did not see Jesus as the awaited messiah is that Jesus did not in fact accomplish the social transformations spoken about in Old Testament prophecies of the coming messiah. The messiah was not only expected to care about financial and political oppression, the messiah was supposed to fix it! But in the gospels, Jesus did not even seem to care about Roman oppression. It's almost as if political oppression didn't make any difference to his basic message. Jesus was much more critical of the religious leadership in his day than he was the political leadership. I don't want to engage in a full Bible-study right here, but the hoped for messiah was supposed to come and achieve a military victory over the oppressors - that was how peace was going to come. If you don't believe me, we just sang it. From VU 1 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" we have the line, "from every foe deliver them". "Deliver them" does not refer to pizza. "Deliver them" means killing people.

To me the question, "Why did Jewish people not recognize Jesus as the Jewish messiah" is a ridiculous question. A better question is why did anybody? And the answer - in a very short summary - is also contained in "O Come, O Come", where it says, "and give them victory o're the grave". 2000 years ago Jesus appeared, and he did not fulfill the expectations of the Jewish messiah. But by perhaps around 120 years later, Jesus had found his niche as a "Christian messiah", fulfilling expectations, but not the Jewish expectations. This was a huge change too by the way. The hoped for Jewish messiah was expected to bring collective peace through military force. The Christian messiah brought individual peace through tolerance and understanding. From "O Come, O Come" again, "O bid our sad divisions cease, and be for us the Prince of Peace".

Jesus - arguable - was not the Jewish messiah, but he was a messiah that people needed. Today certainly, a messiah of peace is something we might still hope for. We do not need a messiah of military conquest anyway. Global powers are doing that just fine on their own. But a messiah of peace could perhaps really be a saviour. A messiah of peace could perhaps be the saviour we actually need. Jesus turned out to not meet

messianic expectations, and yet, satisfied other needs, which is I why I just used the completely unofficial, unorthodox, and un-endorsed term, “Christian messiah”. But effectively, that is what is meant by the term, “The Christ.”

[Ask: What hopes do you have this Advent]

What is hope? According to Wikipedia, “Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one’s life or the world at large.”¹ So who can be hopeful? According to that definition, anybody can be hopeful because hope - at least according to Wikipedia - is a state of mind based only on our own expectations. In other words, it is is a state of mind based only on our attitude. If you want more hope in your life, change your attitude. Sounds simple, right?

In practice, for most people it isn’t that simple. Hope can feel very elusive for people who have had difficult lives, who have learned that regardless of whatever attempts they have made to improve their lives in the past, that all their efforts at fixing things are futile. If trying to change your life is seen as futile, hope becomes a vanishing quantity.

It’s a bit like the story that has been told so many times that perhaps it might even be true: If you take a baby elephant, you can keep it in a confined space by putting a rope around its neck and attaching the rope to a post. The baby elephant will try to pull away, but cannot get away. As the elephant grows, it learns that it cannot escape from the rope and post so it stops trying at all. And - as the story goes - you can completely immobilize a huge mature elephant that has been trained this way by putting a rope around its neck, even if you don’t secure the rope to anything at all. The elephant has learned that once there is a rope around its neck, it cannot run away. Attempts to find freedom are futile and the elephant no longer even tries to go where it wants to go. In that state, the animal has no hope.

As humans, we do this too of course. How many of us have - at least on occasion

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope>

- found ourselves in situations where we simply could not see any hope at all? How many of us have - at least on occasion - found it impossible to not get sucked into yet another untenable situation in our own lives? If we have learned over time that our efforts are always futile, then we can become like the elephant, except that in humans it is called “Learned Helplessness”. I think a better term would be “Learned Hopelessness” because it is a hopeless state - a state of having no hope. It’s a cruel irony actually, because when we are in that state, hope is exactly what is needed.

If my words today are reminding you of any disappointments in your own lives, then you are invited to embrace hope this Advent. Hope for you might not be some great miracle. Hope is not wishful thinking either. Hope is looking for and seeing signs of new life in our midst. As Jesus said in Luke today, “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.” We may or may not see Jesus in our midst, but perhaps we will see signs of that. We are all invited to see - and to find - and to be for others - the kingdom of God in our own midst. That is miracle enough.

Looking for Jesus in our midst in 2018 does not mean looking for a baby in a manger. That would be easy, particularly if an angel gave us GPS co-ordinates. Looking for Jesus in our midst means looking for the Christ - the messiah - that we need to find our own healing and wholeness. That’s why I hope everyone participates in our Advent groups this year, where we will be looking for Jesus in non-baby form.

This Advent you are invited to look for the hope that you need. And if you don’t find it within, look out, look beyond yourself to find Jesus in your midst. “Look out” is not a warning. “Look out” is a directive to look beyond what you already know when you look for Jesus in our midst.

What are you looking for this Advent? What do you hope for? Our journey begins right here. And remember. We are all in this together.

Amen.