

“Glimmer of Hope”

Sermon – December 3, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

How many of you have ever been in a cave or cavern? While I’ve never gone spelunking, which they now call caving, I have been in many caverns.

In my youth my Boy Scout troop did a hike in cave with a guide. Part of the hike was lit only by our flashlights—the old handheld ones that took size D batteries. It was a bit tricky walking—damp and slippery.

At one point walking along a ledge, one of the scouts dropped his flashlight into clear water about six feet below us. It shone brightly but there was no getting it back.

When we came to a resting spot the guide told us, “Everyone turn off your flashlights.” We did and it was, as they say, pitch black.

I don’t think any of us in this modern world of electricity and light had ever experienced 100% total darkness.

There was no “letting your eyes adjust.” Your pupils could have dilated to the size of saucer plates and you’d have still seen nothing. And then you realized that if you got lost in the cave and lost your light, you would have a very difficult, if not impossible, time getting out.

I didn’t find it scary so much as sobering. It drove home the need to be prepared, be aware, and be ready.

Then they guide lit a single candle. And all of a sudden, our spirits brightened! It was amazing how much a small light in the darkness could make such a difference. It was not enough to light up the cave, but if we had been lost it would have provided a glimmer of hope.

Today is the start of our liturgical year, which begins with the season of Advent. In Advent we prepare for a threefold coming of Christ. First with the Incarnation of God at Bethlehem, that is the birth of Jesus.

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Second with the perpetual presence of Christ in communion, as we will have today.

And third with Christ’s Second Coming and final judgement.

Christ has come. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

And in the Western Christian tradition, each of the four Sundays in Advent have a theme: hope, peace, joy, and love.

When you heard the scriptures passages read today, though it may not have sounded that way to you, they do speak of hope.

The Old Testament passage from Isaiah 64 is part of a lament. Thanks to the Persians the Israelites are returning from exile in Babylon. But they find a destroyed city and temple and they have conflicts with the people who had been left behind.

The prophet voices familiar yearnings, “If only you would show up, God, and fight our battles, then our enemies would not harm us.”

“And by the way, because you weren’t around, we ended up sinning. At least now we got you to come back and pay attention to us again.”

Then the prophet admits they can do nothing without God and begs God to work among them again.

The passage reminds us that we are not in control and that our relationship with God needs healing. Our sin too often manifests in our attempts to keep God in a box that we can manage, taming God’s power, but the poem reminds us that God cannot be contained. And, thank God (literally) for that because that also means that God’s grace cannot be contained.

The poem ends in hope that comes with humility. As verse 8 says, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

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The epistle lesson is the greeting of Paul to church he founded in Corinth.

We will hear more from Paul’s letters to the Corinthians in this lectionary year, but suffice to say they had their problems, mainly from becoming self-centered.

While he will admonish them later in the letter, Paul starts off with words of affirmation for the people—but with God at the center. And the hope that Christ will strengthen them until the end and quote “be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Corinthians forgot they were living in the “in between time”—between the Resurrection and the Second Coming. They were viewing things through the lens of this world and their individual status and literally holier-than-thou attitudes.

Paul reminds them that it is God at work in the community. It is by God’s grace they (and we) are called into the fellowship of Christ. This grace is never appropriated individually, just for oneself, but is always communal, always as community.

The gospel lesson is from Mark 13, which is often call the “Little Apocalypse” and it certainly has that end-of-the-world aspect. But remember that “apocalypse” is Greek for “revelation.” So what is Jesus “revealing” in this passage?

Mark’s Jesus has two seemingly contradictory examples. On the one hand, we will see the signs for the Son of Man coming like we see a fig tree blossoming branches. Further, this “generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

But then Jesus says in verses 32-33, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

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He then gives the example of a man going on a journey putting his slaves in charge, saying in verse 35, “Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come.”

As Professor Courtney Buggs at Christian Theological Seminary puts it, “The lesson of the fig tree juxtaposed to the parable of the houseowner may be interpreted as predictable imminence and unpredictable suddenness.” That is, we can see the signs but can still be caught unaware when it actually happens.

So how do we play this waiting game? Always on edge? Give up in futility? We play the long game. We play it with our lives. We all know we are going to die. We just don’t know when. And it can happen suddenly without warning. So we live every day shaping our lives and others in Christ working through us.

We do not “wait” as if we were standing in line to be one of the elect. We “wait” through action, through praying and thanksgiving, through singing and sharing that transforms our speech and knowledge, our words and expectations, our thoughts and deeds into conformity with Jesus.

And we do so as a community. We remain alert as a community, prepare as a community, discern as a community, comfort as a community.

We are ready for our master’s return because everyone is working together, with their own jobs in community, and together staying alert.

Be a light to those in the darkness and together we can be not a glimmer but a beacon of hope.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen.