

Hope
by Ridgley Joyner
Luke 21:28-36

I have a confession:

This year, the Christmas music...as soon as it hit the radio stations...it was playing in my car. Now, in the past I have been that person that sticks to Christmas after Thanksgiving. I've never decorated my home until at least the first week in December, but the music...well the music is my weak spot.

I have to say that Christmas songs are not songs I can listen to all year round, but the second the weather gets crisp and the leaves fall to the ground, I can't help but get excited about lighting candles in the early dark evenings, movies that warm my heart and are way too sappy, and songs that bring a smile to my face—even if the songs are a far cry from the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Tom Petty, you name it. But Brenda Lee is right—you WILL get a sentimental feeling when you hear voices singing let's be jolly deck the halls with bells of holly. Christmas music, as bad as some of it is—it is so very dear to me.

It is no secret to you all that my favorite Christmas album of all time is Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton's Once upon a Christmas. It is something my whole family continues to listen to, even when apart. My parents smirk when they visit each of us and hear it playing in our homes. It is a Beckett family favorite for sure and I'm not entirely positive my parents worked to make it that way. Admittedly, every Christmas this is an album that I turn to over and over and over again.

It is one of those timeless albums for me because of the way it makes me *feel* when I hear the familiar tunes and the singers. The second the album plays I have vivid memories of making cutout cookies with my mom—me eating the batter off the mixing paddles, Mallory decorating the cookies, and Natalie pulling the fresh ones out of the oven...and what are we humming together? "It's Christmas time again another year has come and gone and I can't keep a wonderin' how the old folks are at home.."

When I hear this album, I think of the fresh smell of a fireplace at my grandparents home in the blue ridge mountains and opening up a gift from my Poppy—a handmade wooden cradle for my doll and I can almost smell my Grammy's freshly made monkey bread cooling on the counter.

When I hear this album, I think of counting each and every Christmas light hung around the ceiling of my room when I couldn't sleep. I think of my sister and I watching reruns of Blossom when we woke up at 4am on Christmas Day, counting the seconds until we could come downstairs and it not be too go-back-to-bed early.

What makes it something I love is that it fulfills this deep need for me to revisit a place in time that is so important to me—and that place is "home". Now, when I say home, I don't even picture a place, a house because those changed over the years, when I think of home—when I am homesick—it is almost always for a *feeling*.

While sometimes we feel like homesick may be a "negative" term, it is something I actually look forward to every year. The memories are so clear it's almost like I am there. Those feelings of

safety, warmth, love, joy, fill me once more—and lately—it’s been just in time. I look forward every year to what is considered the most hopeful season because of these meaningful memories that invoke *home*—people, places, relationships, traditions or even songs.

I am sure for you there are traditions, times that you look forward to remembering every year when Advent begins...as we anticipate Christmas. Perhaps you are homesick for some of these *feelings* too.

Every time we approach Advent I find myself holding on to the very things that take me back to something I am homesick for. I can’t WAIT to listen to Christmas music because I need to revisit that *feeling* in order to be hopeful in a world that feels so hopeless. I need that warm feeling of hope even if it is something I am just longing for and not realized yet.

If we are honest we bring these expectations into church. We always want to jump straight to the Christmas story—to look back—we want to revisit the tradition of reading those passages that are so familiar to us—and boy do we ever want to sing those beautiful Christmas hymns---about a baby in a manger or angels singing gloria we want to sing them so badly. And perhaps we get a little disappointed when we show up to worship and all we get is O come O Come Emmanuel. Now is the time we wait in hope for God.

While it is a common thing to turn to Christmastime memories of years past for hope, we don’t always think at this time of year about looking forward for hope. And friends, that is what Advent is all about. Advent is a time in which we are going through these traditions, reminiscing of what was, thinking of home—and it is also a time that scripture calls us to look forward—to find hope in what was: the birth of Christ, but also to find hope in what will be: when Christ comes again in Glory.

This morning, we are not at the manger quite yet. In fact, we are far from it. Our text for the first Sunday in advent—the first Sunday in the beginning of a new liturgical year—is one of Jesus foretelling the end of times. God is inviting us to not look back to what we know, but to look forward in hope for what will be. And God does so through the words of Jesus at the *end* of the book of Luke.

The gospel of Luke is believed to have been written around the time of the destruction of the temple, when some Jews were wondering if it was a fulfillment of the prophets’ end time predictions. They were trying to reconcile all that was crashing down around them. Perhaps, they thought, the very challenges we are experiencing are a sign that the kingdom of God is near.

Now our passage this morning is only one part of a greater whole in chapter 21. Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, and someone asks him when the “Day of the Lord” will be and what signs will there be? Many prophets before Jesus spoke of the day of the Lord in destructive and fearful ways—hellfire and brimstone. But Jesus shares a destructive message that somehow seems...redemptive...constructive in nature, inviting the hearers to draw near to God.

Jesus doesn’t seem to sugar coat things here for us. The second coming—the kingdom of God being near is scary, destructive...and even worse...it’s brought about by the work of the Lord.

Yet, even in the face of fear, even in the face of destruction and chaos, Jesus assures us that this is a *good thing*. In the face of this, Jesus calls us to be prayerful, to be watchful for a God that is with us to the end.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus is talking about the day of the Lord and he says in verse 5 that what you see will cease to be. This beautiful temple adorned in beauty that points the very covenantal relationship of Israel and God for instance- not a single stone will be left on top of one another. I don't know about you, but as much as we *know* the kingdom of God being near is a good thing, it feels scary, it feels chaotic.

Methodist minister and former chaplain at Duke University Will Willomon shares a story of a time he was with his students on a medical mission trip in Honduras. During the trip one evening, they went around the circle and shared a favorite Bible verse...one of the students quoted John 3:16, another 1 Corinthians 13...and then it came to one of the women they had served at the clinic that day. Through the help of a nurse translator, she shared that her favorite verse was in Luke 21, where Jesus shares that God is going to burn all of this up, and everything is going to be destroyed...She said "I find that so comforting." Struck by this, Willomon asks the translator—is there a miscommunication here? That's comforting? The nurse looked at him and said, "I was talking with this woman in the clinic today. She's had five children in her life...three have died before age 3 from malnutrition." It was then he said, that I got it. You see, sometimes good news and bad news...depends on the hearers of the news.

News of a destructive God at end times can be fear inducing for those of us who have the blessing of comfort, safety. The redemptive thing about a God that will "burn it all down" is that for some it will be uncomfortable losing power, safety, things we have worked hard for, things we think we deserve. But for some it will be a relief, for some it will be an answer to prayer.

It is no secret to us that our world is far from perfect. In fact, it is riddled with hopelessness most days. Last week, I read that the city of Philadelphia is likely to hit 500 deaths related to gun violence this year. As fears about the Pandemic surrounds us, people still feel unsafe in their homes—what should be the safest place. Children are scared to play outside. Mental illness, Chronic Illness and cancer continues to not discriminate—penetrating each and every home. Issues of injustice still lurk beneath the surface—or some right in front of our faces. Thanksgiving and the approach of the holidays causes us to look at just how much of a year we have weathered. All the hurt, pain, trials...it all comes rushing back to us. If we look around, it is no wonder we are homesick for feelings of comfort, peace, security.

In verse 33 of our scripture reading, Jesus assures them and us of the steadfast nature of God—that even though things that we know of will leave, God will never leave. Even in the face of disaster and chaos—like the destruction of Israel's religious home and center of their lives, God will not be destroyed, and God will redeem this world.

The hope here is the through it all we can be assured without a shadow of a doubt, that even though the signs of our world being destroyed can be fearful, that is something we are to be homesick for. Perhaps even hopeful for.

Hope begins with a recognition that the way the world is—is not how it should be, and that God will redeem it. It is in this realization that we can be awake to wonder—to be alert to the ways that God is already bringing forth that redemption in our lives.

Kathy Beach-Verhey writes, “The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us.”

One of my favorite worship services every year is our longest night service held on the winter solstice—the longest night—the night with the most darkness. That is the day that we retreat to a sanctuary and find solace in the God of hope, even when the world leads us to believe there isn’t any left—that the coming of God’s light in the darkness is the very thing that keeps us going. Those moments, when we are sitting in a cold dark place, some even shedding a tear, but together, raising our voice in song proclaiming O Come O Come Emmanuel---to come sooner not later...that is the great good news. That is hopeful. God is with us. Because we are a people who are homesick for the happy of years past and we are a people who are homesick for the redemption of the time to come.

We are reminded that as much as what we want to hold onto joy, peace, hope and love in a tender way this holiday season—that we, that the people of God in scripture--still live in a world that is fear-inducing. It is then that we want to retreat most to what was, homesick for our comfortable feelings of home and security to ease our fears and give us hope. But hope is forward reaching—God calls us to be homesick not for what was but to be homesick for a world that will be.

Jesus tells us that just as we see the seasons change among us, God is working a new thing among us and there are signs of it everywhere. These signs are our hope. Jesus urges us not to retreat but to be reawakened—to seek God with us already at work—prayerful and attentive to the fact that in the face of destruction, God draws near to us.

As we are longing to look back and remember the story of Jesus being born, Jesus is inviting us to look forward with hope, not fear but expectancy--awake to all of the ways that God is even now fulfilling what this future might be. That we would be filled with awe seeing the already but not yet work of a redemptive God—in destruction of systems of injustice, in abundant food for those who are hungry, in a place at the table for someone who would usually be overlooked, in the fearless play of a child in their neighborhood, in the hospitality of a stranger. Being awake to the wonder of a redemptive God allows us to witness hope—when we find each other again. When our strength in challenging times is only possible with the prayers of our loved ones holding us up.

This week—as you are enjoying those traditions of years past invoking feelings of what was may you be awake to the ways that God is already at work and the ways that God is calling you to live into the future with hope. Let us wait for the Lord.