
Advent #1: Look out!
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 1, 2024
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 a 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 it to. 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, it seem like hope should be week 2. Not week 1. I mean why would we hope for anything at all if we can not imagine a better life. If we didn't have problems. If we don't want reality to be different. Surely hope is step 2. Step 1 should be recognizing our disappointments, frustrations, concerns, and pains. Step 1 must be to acknowledge that our lives are not actually perfect, and therefore, we need hope. Being honest about our disappointments in life surely must come before hope.

[image: merry disappointment card]

Wouldn't that make a nice Christmas card - "Have a happy disappointment"? But seriously, if our lives were perfect already, why would we need to hope? What would there be for us to hope for if our lives were already absolutely fantastic? But don't worry, I don't want to discuss disappointment today, so we will stick to tradition and discuss hope.

[image: Palestinian field]

Let's begin with a little thought experiment. I invite all of us to put our minds back about 2000 years, before Jesus was born. You are living in Palestine. Now imagine what your life might be like. Imagine that you are at work, or at home, or some other place. But put yourself somewhere concrete. If you are imagining 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 instead you are imagining yourself working outside, imagine the actual work. Perhaps you are tending these olive trees. Feel the texture of the olives. Smell the trees. Feel the warmth of the sun. Feel the cool breeze.

Wherever you are imagining that you are - 2000 years ago - spend a moment in your imagination being present to all your senses. 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.

[Pause briefly.]

[image: palestinian soup]

Now if you are making soup, perhaps you are hoping that it tastes good, or that your children will be home soon. If you are tending your olive trees perhaps you are hoping for a good crop this year. Or you are hoping to prices to be good when you are ready to sell. Or perhaps you are hoping that the weather will cooperate for your olive trees. These are the sorts of things that normal people hope for. Now come back to the present. Or stay in the past if you are having a good time there.

In our traditional gloss over human history we often say that 2000 years ago, Jewish people were waiting - 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 living 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 did not see things that way. Why did most Jewish people not recognize Jesus as the Jewish messiah?

There are 2 obvious reasons for that. One reason goes back to our thought

experiment. When I asked you to imagine what you yourself were hoping 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. Just like today, we are all driven - most of the time - by the very present needs of the day, not by fantastical metaphysical speculations.

And we have to remember that in his day, Jesus did not actually make much of a splash. Jesus traveled 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 Instagram. 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. Most Jewish people never heard his name. 2000 years ago, Jewish people did not really reject Jesus - they just never heard of him.

[image: roman emperor]

The other reason that Jewish people did not see Jesus as the hoped for 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 them! But in the gospels, Jesus does not even seem to care about Roman oppression. It's almost as if political oppression did not make any difference to Jesus's core 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 - come to our Advent Discussion Group for that. 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, don't take my word for it. We just sang it together. From VU 1 "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" we just sang the line, "from every foe deliver them".

[image: Jesus delivers pizza]

I'm sure we all know that "Deliver them" does not refer to pizza. "Deliver them" meant killing the people that you do not like.

[image: Palestinian field]

To me the question, “Why did Jewish people not recognize Jesus as the Jewish messiah” is actually a ridiculous question. A better question is why did anybody think that Jesus was the Jewish messiah? 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 90 years later, Jesus had found his niche as a “Christian messiah”. He fulfilled expectations, just 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, we have the line “O bid our sad divisions cease, and be for us the Prince of Peace”.

Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, but he was a messiah that some 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 already trashing the planet and killing loads of people pretty well without God’s help. But a messiah of peace could perhaps really be a saviour. A messiah of peace could perhaps be a saviour we actually need. Jesus did 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, “Christ.”

[image: hope]

But back to hope. 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.” So who can be hopeful? According to that definition, anybody can be hopeful because hope is a state of mind based only on our own expectations. In other words, it 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 is not that simple. Hope can feel very elusive for people who have difficult lives. Hope is hard to imagine for people 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.

[image: elephant and rope]

It's a bit like the story that has been told so many times that perhaps it might even be true. That if you take a baby elephant, you can keep it in a confined space by putting a rope around one of its legs and attaching the rope to a post. The baby elephant will try to pull away many times, but it cannot get away because the rope and the post are too strong for the baby elephant. As the elephant grows, it has learned 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 simply putting a rope around its leg. You don't even have to attach the rope to a post. The elephant has learned that once there is a rope around its leg, it cannot run away. Attempts to find freedom are futile and so the elephant no longer even tries to go where it wants to go. In that state, the animal has no hope. But to be more accurate, the elephant has thrown hope away itself. Because a large mature elephant could easily pull on the rope and rip the post out of the ground. The animal is actually free, but it thinks it is captive. And so it actually is captive. But it is not captive to the rope. It is captive to its own mind. It is captive to its own self-limiting beliefs.

[image: learned helplessness]

As humans, we do this too of course. How many of us have - at least on occasion - 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? How many of us. Have - at least on occasion - been drawn into yet another never ending drama? Perhaps a drama with friends or family. If we have learned over time that our efforts to improve our own lives are always futile, then we can become like the elephant. We stop trying to make our own lives better. In humans this is called "Learned Helplessness".

[image: learned hopelessness]

I actually think a better term is "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 we need. And hope may even be the only thing we can get.

And yet, we are hopeless anyway.

If my words today are reminding you of any disappointments in your own life, then you are invited to embrace hope this Advent. Hope for you might not be some great miracle. Hope is also not wishful thinking. Hope is the realization that new life and healing is possible - regardless of how many times you've been disappointed in the past. Hope is the belief that tomorrow can in fact be better. Hope is the belief that you yourself can in fact become better.

Hope is looking for and seeing signs of new life in our midst. Hope is allowing ourselves to work for a better tomorrow. 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 appear physically in our midst, but perhaps we will see signs that point to new life. We are all invited to see - and to find - and to be for others - the kingdom of God in our own midst. And that should be miracle enough for anyone.

[image: look out]

This is the first week in Advent. And we are invited to look. But to look for what? In 2024 we should not be looking for a baby in a manger. Looking for Jesus in our midst today means looking for the Christ that we need, to find our own healing and wholeness. And one important step along the way is looking for hope.

So, this Advent we are invited to look for the hope that we 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 your midst. Look beyond your own disappointments. Look beyond your own learned helplessness and hopelessness. Look out!!

What are you looking for this Advent? What do you hope for? Our journey begins right here and now. If you struggle to find hope, reach out to trusted friends, or to me. We are all in this together. Look Out!

Amen.