

# Real Hope

A Sermon Expositing Luke 21:25-36

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It gives me hope!

Looking down from high above, footage from a drone I presume, we can see that for once – in at least one place – the beautiful multi hewed greens of forest encroach on the melancholy grays of the urban world rather than the other way around. Plant life is in the process of reclaiming its space. At some point rainfall destabilized a building's foundation and a tiny crack appeared. A Fall breeze washed the place with seed pods and one found its way into the crack. A tiny tree rooted itself there and began to grow pressing slowly, powerfully at the edges of the crack now widening insisting on its place in the world. In time the gradually expanding crack weakened to concrete of the foundation and the bricks around the tree gave way and tumbled. Season after season of Fall leaves untouched and on their way back to becoming soil again have piled up and begun the process of covering over the heaps of rubble. The same natural drama is unfolding slowly, relentlessly in every part of the abandoned city. Vines swallow city busses now rusting out – oxidizing their way back from whence they came. Shrubs and trees overhang streets, their roots chipping away at the concrete from below. Wildlife make their homes where once they were unwelcome. Deliberate and Determined, the earth is swallowing up a city no longer used and returning that space to its untouched form. It will be some time before Chernobyl is inhabitable again by humans. Scientists suggest maybe 20,000 years, but perhaps having gifts taken away until you have learned how to respect and care for them is a lesson for more than children. Even so, in the space of just my lifetime we can see that the site of a cataclysmic event can be drawn back into God's ongoing creative process. "Look at all the trees," says the Jesus by the words of the gospel writer, Luke, "see for yourselves and know...that the Kingdom of God is near." It gives me hope to see that redemption is not merely an idea embedded in a centuries old collection of dusty documents, but a reality woven into the fabric of our physical world. Redemption is a real thing and that gives me hope.

And that's exactly what we celebrate this time of year – hope. For people of an incarnational faith (a faith wrapped in flesh), the birth of Jesus signifies the dawning of the redemption of all creation. That's what we long for at so many levels and Advent is our season of leaning in, waiting for, striving toward that Holy night when the salvation of the world rests in a manger. And so our waiting is adorned with festivity and joy. *We throw parties and bake cookies and buy things for each other and make things for each another; we play joyful music and drink warm peppermint everything, we deck the halls, bring trees indoors and take colorful lights outdoors and we make a big, joyful fuss all in eager anticipation of a cultural celebration, which points us to a cosmic culmination. It's the most wonderful time of the year, so why? Oh why is Jesus in such a bad mood!?*

Or maybe it isn't that Jesus is in a bad mood, maybe it is the people who put the lectionary readings and the church calendar together. On this first Sunday in a season of hope, peace, joy, and love they start us out with a reading of Jesus telling us that the sky is falling. Almost literally, he paints the picture of people around the globe fainting because of the fear and stress they're under due to the condition of the world. This is kind of the

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

universal wrap up of the more specific woes he has proclaimed in the paragraphs before our lection in which he also told them that the temple, center of religious and cultural life and identity, would be destroyed. What we're reading this morning is a prediction on the lips of Jesus that, yes, the redemption of the world is coming, but between now and then there will be such turmoil, pain, fear, and catastrophic loss that many won't even be able to handle it. Why is Jesus in such a bad mood? Why are the compilers of the lectionary such spoil sports? Hope! Hope! We're leaning in to HOPE!! If we're going to have hope we need to lean in to positive images of the world yet to come – the forest reclaiming a ruined city, people drawing together in harmony and love, the lion laying down with the lamb and such – not this terrifying prediction of a cataclysmic future.

Except, this is no prediction of the future, not for the first hearers of Luke's gospel. Don't forget, when we read the gospels we're not playing back recordings of the words of Jesus. We're reading traditional stories about Jesus passed down from one generation to the next and reassembled by writers in an order and with a method intent on telling a story relevant to their communities. Yes, if in your imagination, you place yourself in the temple with Jesus as he tells of this terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day you'll be listening to a future prediction. But place yourself instead, in the original hearing of the gospel writing of Luke, which happened some time later – later enough in fact, that the destruction of the temple Jesus foretold has almost certainly already occurred.

Roman occupation caused serious political strife among Judeans who had varying ideas of how to respond to Rome – to simply assimilate and bend a knee and pay the heavy taxes of the emperor, to diplomatically eek out a mutual path forward, to band together against them and fight. Lest this description of political realities feel stale in the air, make note of the political strife we've encountered in our own time of late and know that life in this period was hard for everyone – especially those without a seat at the table or a nickel to their name. Groups of Judean rebels took control of Jerusalem and held it for a few years in some cases essentially becoming occupiers of their own people. Then in the year 70 an aspirational Roman general marched to the city and laid siege for months on end until, in the culminating days, his forces broke the backs of the defenders, sacked the city, and tore down the temple. Death and destruction ruled the day and hope was absolutely lost. The people who heard Luke's gospel for the first time had lived through these things and were living in the aftermath under an occupying government both angry and constantly worried about further uprisings. For those who heard Luke's gospel, Jesus's words weren't a prediction of the future, they were a description of present reality.

Do you see how that changes the reading? If the message is that before redemption comes there will be calamity, it is hard to find hope within? But if the calamity being described is, for hearers, a description of their present reality then hope comes in the form of the promise that these struggles mark the coming of a new day just as new foliage marks the coming of summer. It gives them hope!

You see Jesus, and his storyteller, Luke, seemed to believe something that seems as operative now as it was when the gospel was written: You can't have real hope without an earnest grasp of present struggles. And an earnest grasp of present struggles is what truly compels us to the object of our hope.

David Attenborough, though a self-professed agnostic, seems to understand this same idea and it is on full display in his film, "A Life on Our Planet," something of a memoir of what he has seen in his 93 years as a film maker and natural historian. The images of the earth redeeming the city of Chernobyl I described earlier are his images from that film. The hope described therein is also his, but also mine. But the chernobyl images come at the conclusion of the film. Unless watchers shamelessly skip ahead to the end, they cannot get to this hope without a full treatment of the current peril our planet is in. Images of the beauty and wonder of the natural world just a few decades ago juxtaposed with newer images and stories of ecosystems disrupted, magnificence tarnished, economies demolished, lives and livelihoods destroyed, and landscapes ruined. Attenborough holds nothing back. As he shows the impact of climate change he also explains what it will take to slow and stop the degradation. It will be one of the greatest technological, scientific, and political challenges in world history. Only with that point securely made, only after taking us to the brink of hopelessness does he take us to Chernobyl where hope is springing from the ground.

Do you see, with only one part of Attenborough's story or the other, we do nothing. If all is lost and the planet is doomed, we simply live out our days as best we can and watch the growing destruction take place. If we have only the rosy image of a planet that can care for itself, we simply go about our business with no change to behavior, consumption patterns, political care and thus this great hope will never be realized. Together however, a real grasp of the realities and a hopeful future spur us to action; change the way we view the world and the way we act within it; and send us in pursuit of the hope for which we long.

Jesus wasn't in a bad mood, he just knew that true hope requires a grasp of the real world.

If we want to latch on to those lofty, hopeful words of Amanda Gorman, "...our people diverse, and beautiful will emerge battered and beautiful, for there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it," they begin with a grasp of the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates who writes an open letter to his son telling him that the world is yet a harsh and dangerous place for young men with black skin.

We can only know if we are truly interested in living into Dr. King's inspiring dream if we're willing to hear its high words echo through the pavilion at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama where over 800 suspended blocks of steel represent counties in which lynchings have taken place and bear the names of the victims.

Francois Clemmons was one of the first African Americans to have a consistent place on a children's television show in the 1960s. In a time when political forces were battling over the segregation of public swimming pools, he sat down for a nice chat and cooled his feet in a wading pool with Mr. Rogers. If that simple, heart-warming image of progress is to be an enduring symbol of hope for us; we'll also need to listen to the voices of those who've taken to the streets to remind us that interactions with law enforcement do not have the same outcomes for people of color as for white people.

The unknown artist Banksy routinely adorns the West Bank wall with images that remind us of the human cost of that conflict. Banksy's gift of irony can cause a sense of despair, but to his corpus of art I add the stole I'm wearing made by Israeli and Palestinian women working side by side and ultimately gifted to a male Christian minister who wears it with joy.

Those heart wrenching moments at the cusp of winter calling out the names of transgender people on a cold street corner push us ahead to secure ever more the days illustrated by that warm, joyful summer festival and parade we call Pride.

Jesus wasn't in a bad mood, he just wanted us to know that authentic hope springs from a real understanding and a meaningful engagement with the world as it is, not just as we long for it to be.

Friends, hear the good news: if you, like me struggle sometimes to look into the world and find what is good; if you look into the world and see how many are hurting; if you look and see unkindness on an unfathomable scale and widespread willful ignorance; if you see greed on the part of some and resulting poverty on the part of others; if you see that even within yourself there is potential for living into the things in this world that cause harm rather than good; if you look out into the world and see trouble everywhere – good. You have everything you need to find real hope.

Amen.