

LIVING THE PROMISE

Advent 1 – Cycle C: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Professor Neil Alexander shocked us all in class one day in my first year as a student at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary by saying that his faith compelled him to go outside each day and look up. His reference was to today's Gospel; and he told us this detail concerning his personal spirituality, I expect, to keep us from dismissing descriptions such as we have in today's Gospel as quaint. He knew that a critical reading of the Bible was risky business, and that a little knowledge in biblical studies, essentially what we had in our first year of seminary, was dangerous. And so he made this seemingly outrageous statement without apology in order to challenge our perhaps-too-analytical approach to reading the Bible. And his claim that he went outside each day and looked up was a cue, it seems to me, for our growth in faith and understanding; that there is, beyond the apocalyptic imagery of Luke 21, a call to us as disciples of Jesus to live deeply in the world, ever-mindful of the spiritual reality in, with, and under existence; a spiritual reality that transforms existence into life in all its glorious abundance. Neil may not expect to see the Son of Man coming in a cloud when he goes outside and looks up, but he knows that receiving the promises of God in Christ Jesus are essential for our growth in grace; that the rituals we follow speak a truth that is beyond words; that faith must find expression within us, within our thoughts, feelings, and actions, if it is ever to be proclaimed. And so, he was calling us to live, as Jesus calls us to live, with a consciousness of the One who, even when all hell breaks loose, even when we cannot muster belief, let alone faith, never lets us go.

Jeremiah wrote to the people of Judah during a time of incredible instability which eventually saw the kingdom fall to Babylon, Jerusalem destroyed, and the people sent away to exile. But the passage we read as this morning's First Reading was before the crisis. Jeremiah has no trouble seeing the signs of the times and criticizing all of the conditions leading to Judah's fall, including the fever of nationalism and poor leadership. Many of his prophecies cut too close to the quick and he spends a fair bit of time under house arrest, as a result. But this morning's passage is not condemnation, but rather hope – hope in the One whose love is steadfast; hope in the One who never lets go. And so he prophesies a new David – David signifying not only God's blessing in times past, but also a golden age in which, at least in retrospect, justice and righteousness prevailed. Such justice and righteousness are not part of Jeremiah's present reality, and so his prophecy serves to recall the Hebrew people to faith in the God who loves justice and righteousness so much that there will be restoration. "I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah," Jeremiah writes on God's behalf; "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

Jeremiah may not have been able to prophesy in any more detail than in the metaphor of the Branch for David, but the meaning was clear: in, with, and under life as we know it, God is present to bear us up, to call us to new beginnings, to love us and call to us through the worst and the best of times.

Beth Bretzlaff is the chaplain at Ashbury College in Ottawa, and she tells this personal story about discovering life in the midst of death; God at a time when she entered into the world of chaos, the world of fear and foreboding Jesus describes in today's Gospel. She writes...

As her tiny, perfectly formed hand lay in mine, something stirred within me. Beneath the anguish, searing pain and deep despair, an awakening slowly began to unfurl like the fronds of a New Zealand fern. At first, I did not recognize what it was; mistaken perhaps for giddy exhaustion. As my daughter's hand warmed mine, a glimmer of hope pierced my consciousness.

I was unable to comprehend how this could be, as the baby I had longed for and been surprised by, was most likely going to die. Hannah's little hand – relaxed, trusting, vulnerable – how could it communicate hope when it belonged to an infant, born five weeks early, having undergone several major heart operations, and now only continuing to exist thanks to the miracle of life support?

My rational being rebelled; anger rose within me and cries of BUT IT IS NOT FAIR tried to drown out the soft yet bright tendrils, hesitantly but unremittingly growing within me.

My soul had be bared; my heart wrenched; my body exhausted; my mind numbed; and my faith pushed beyond what I thought was its limit. I was not easily going to submit to anything that might simply bring more pain.

Despite my best defences, hope steadily flowed into by being to such an extent that I could no longer ignore or deny its presence. In that moment, I realized that Hannah was holding me. Her soul was gently caressing mine with grace and love as surely as her hand touched mine. Hannah was offering me a most precious gift. There in Starship Children's Hospital, Auckland, New Zealand, in the face of my child's impending death, I faced a watershed moment – to choose despair or hope.

As the life-preserving machines chugged away, beeps from various monitors pierced the room and nurses went about their caring work. I sat by wee Hannah as though struck dumb. It had been an incredible journey of extremes thus far. Yet this tiny child with her hand in mine, held me and looked into my eyes and offered me the hope that life would prevail. Not in the way I had imagined or dreamed, and most definitely not without intense grief. But life would go on, and I had to choose what kind of life that would be.

Hannah died in my arms a few days later. She simply could not go on any longer. I may have given birth to her, but she gave me back my life. Hannah stopped me in my tracks, embraced me in love and confronted me with hope. Her hand in mine became a symbol of the hope that, as once was said, "sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible."

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Neil Alexander invited us into this reality of "seeing the invisible, feeling the intangible, and *accepting* the impossible;" to go outside and look up; to live the promise of God's steadfast love.