

When the Crisis Comes – It's Too Late

From the sermon series: Now – But Then

Text: Isaiah 11:9; I Corinthians 13:13; Luke 1:37

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Our Advent theme comes from Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians in the 13th chapter, where he sets in contrast, "Now - But Then." He writes to this congregation that was bubbling over with spiritual gifts and enthusiasm run out of control, and he urges them to seek the best gift, the gift of love. And in the context of that discussion, he suggests that there are three things that remain - faith, hope, love. He encourages the Corinthians to major in faith and hope and love as that which matter eternally. And in the remaining three weeks of the Advent season, I want to consider with you faith and hope and love. First of all, faith, or maybe the word that for us says it better - trust, that basic orientation of life that is trusting: trusting in God, trusting in life's meaning, in the goodness of reality. To trust is to have a place to stand and to be and then to be free to be in the fullness of every moment. To live by faith is to live by an eternal verity. The gift of faith, the gift of trust enables us to negotiate the passages of life, come what may. And that's really the issue of this message.

I want to suggest to you that the time to cultivate basic trust is before you need it. I think it's at the Advent season that we feel the stark contrast between what is and what might be. It is at this season of the year that we are called to remember that we are people on the way, we are in a process, something's happening, we're going somewhere, there is something developing, something emerging, invisible, unseen. And yet, we're caught up in that process. And to remember, that is to be reminded that what *is* falls so far short of what might be. To be human is not to be locked in to the present, the present moment. It is to be free to unlock from this moment and to travel backward in time through memory and to experience again the joys of the past or the pain of the past. To be human is to have that gift of consciousness that allows us to unlock from this present moment and to travel into the future and to conceive of what might be, to dream of another possibility.

In the Advent season we recognize that it's precisely because we are people on the way, going somewhere we have been and we will be, and the contrast between what is and what might be can be a painful contemplation. And it is only if we

have received the gift of trust that we are able to negotiate every moment with a certain freedom and serenity.

Isn't it remarkable that from ancient time humankind has conceived of something different than that which is? Take the dream, the vision of Isaiah, as we read it a moment ago. There, 2500, 2800 years ago there was a contemplative, there was a religious spirit that was contrasting that which was his context with that which was his dream. He dreamed of a day when there would be a ruler upon whom the spirit of God would fall, a ruler who would not judge by what his eyes saw or his ears heard, a ruler who would discern down into the depths of things. A ruler would arise who would rule with equity, with justice. He would be concerned for society's most vulnerable ones; he would rule with righteousness, and that righteous rule in the arena of history would spill over into nature so that the lion and the lamb would lie down together and the child could play over the adder's den, and they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. What a dream! What a vision! Campaign '96 is warming up. Wouldn't we love such a candidate for office? Wouldn't it be great if we could cast our ballot next November for one upon whom the spirit of God would dwell in fullness, who would judge with equity and rule with righteousness and bring in God's peaceable kingdom?

Luke believed that that one arrived in the child of Mary's womb, a child conceived by the Spirit of God, a child who would bring about that peaceable kingdom. Mary laid hold of the vision and sang a song of praise, *The Magnificat*, which we noted last week, about this child who would raise up the lowly and bring down the arrogant. And yet it seems as though history continues to go along, business as usual. Well, that's not a new problem. It was recognized 2000 years ago. The second Letter of Peter, if you want to refer to it – there were scoffers then who were saying to the likes of St. Luke, "Where is the day of his appearing? It looks pretty much like the same, tired old world to me." And, of course, it is, isn't it? Even 2000 years later.

The Advent season gives us opportunity to reflect on the fact that something's happening. We're moving, we're going somewhere. And we can dream of something quite other than that which confronts us. And yet, troops move into Bosnia where there's a paper peace but no peace in the human heart. And Israel still reels from the assassination of its leader who was seeking peace. And if not on the national or international scene, there are those within our own community who enter into crisis, the kind of crisis that makes us wonder what it's all about and if it's all worth it, and if anybody, anybody is managing this cosmos into which we are caught up. The issue before us this morning: St. Paul says faith is that which abides, but, can I believe it? Can I hold on to the vision? Can I dream the dream? Can I be set free in the present moment because I believe that this present moment does not proscribe the parameters of my possibility?

You'll never gain trust by observing life. That's my point this morning. It is trust that you must bring to experience. It is faith that you must bring to the ongoing story. You'll never gain faith or come to trust simply by observing the story.

One of the great historians of a former generation, H.A.L. Fischer, in his *History of Europe*, wrote these words,

"One intellectual excitement has been denied me. People wiser and more learned than I have discovered in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following another, as wave follows upon wave. Only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique there can be no generalizations, and the only safe rule for the historian is that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen."

That's a good statement. If you go out to the beach today, you'll find one wave crashing on the beach after another - wild, stormy water, wave upon wave crashing on the beach. And Fischer says, "As I observe history, that's what I see." One emergency after another, one crisis after another, one valley of darkness after another. And I see no predetermined pattern. I see no rhythm. I see no pattern. Honestly, as I look at it as an historian, that's all I can see. And as an historian, that's all one can see if one starts out with a blank sheet, if one would simply, neutrally, somewhat objectively survey the human story, then one cannot say it more eloquently than Fischer has said it. The pattern is not in there to be seen. The pattern is imposed by those who have faith and that are given eyes to see it.

I picked up a book last night, which someone sent me. I've been dabbling, you know, in cosmology, physics, astronomy, that sort of thing. But, this book is entitled, *God and The New Biology*, by an Oxford biologist, Arthur Peacocke. Fascinating discussion in which he acknowledges that it is in physics and cosmological speculation that science is giving us a sense of mystery before this unfolding cosmic drama. But, in molecular and sub-molecular biology as well, there is tremendous ferment and some breakthrough as to the development of the human person and indeed all living structures. And Peacocke suggests a sense of God more immanently involved in that process than we have yet conceived. But he also honors that which has come to light, and that is that there isn't some prescribed pattern, but rather there is both law and chance. And he suggests that the Creator has put into the structure of things a kind of law, a kind of regularity, a kind of structure that gives some stability, but within that, in its sub-molecular structure, as we learn from quantum physics, there are things that happen at that sub-molecular level that can only be described as chance. Unpredictable! Unprogrammable! And Peacocke says that's precisely the point at which creativity is possible. In other words, reality is an open system, not closed.

I think the Christian tradition, or religious people generally, would love to have the system closed and to know that from the beginning to the end it is all determined. That's been used as a kind of security blanket to remove us from the sense of life's fragility and the peril to which our lives are always exposed, but it is not so, really, and we know it, too, out of our experience. H A.L. Fischer is right! One wave after another - that's the way we live. God answers prayer, yes. This one was healed. God answers prayer, maybe not. That one wasn't healed. In all of the existential experiences of our life we would so much love to be able to boil it down and get a finger on it, tie it in a package and put a bow on it and say, "Now, there. That's it. A manageable universe and a secure human existence." But, we *know* it is not so. It is not so!

How, then, can I live? How, then, can I be set free from the constant anxiety of the next moment and tomorrow? By trust. By faith that I do not derive from the observation of the story, but that I bring *to* the story. Because I believe beyond what is observable that there is something happening, and that this process which is going somewhere will have an end which will not be nothing, but something, an end which will not be no one, but someone.

Do you want me to prove it to you? Of course, I can't. That's my point. That's my faith! I trust that. And that's the great divide. Those who live with that trust and those who live perhaps with an agnosticism that says I don't know, or a bitter cynicism that says I don't believe it. Those are the choices.

Well, how do you come with such trust? With some struggle, I would hope. And it is a gift not at our disposal. But a season like this does give us those moments of reflection. And if one longs for some breath as the Advent carol says, some pulse of being stirring as in a heart of stone, if in the longing of one's heart there is at least that openness – at the end of the day, in a moment of reflection – to that light as a falling star across the consciousness of the night of the heart, then perhaps we may be probing the edges of that gift of faith which is a gift of God that is the promise of Advent. And to live by such trust is not to denigrate the present in favor of the future. It is to give a promise for the future that releases us to delight in the present, fully to live, with a measure of peace and joy. The gift of Advent. The gift of the Child.