

A Larger Hope

From the series: Memory and Hope

Micah 5:1-5; Luke 4:16-30

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Advent is a time of contemplation, reflection, and preparation - preparation for what? For the future, surely, but what future? A future in this world and this present age, or a future in another reality, in heaven? The Kingdom of God - is it a present reality and experience, or is it a future state? Advent is a time of remembering, for we have our minds focused on the coming celebration of Christmas and thus on our founding story as Christians - But, Advent is a time of expectation - a time of waiting and the biblical sense of waiting is waiting in hope.

The biblical story is a story about God's engagement in history past and the promise of God's action in history future. History is the ongoing story between God's action, past, and God's action, future. That is the biblical notion. In traditional biblical and liturgical terms, we are in the time between the times - the past coming of God in our flesh and the future appearing of the one who came, coming now to judge and bring all things to their consummation.

Year after year, the same story - The child was given; the King is coming. And it is quite a lovely story that is lodged deeply in our hearts and overflowing with affectional memories as well as filling us with hope and confidence - It is a story that enables us to negotiate the passages of our lives in this world, speaking to us of another world. The story originates in another realm and culminates likewise in another realm.

We speak of God's salvation and, while that is a present experience, its real significance is the promise of eternal life beyond the limits of our earthly journey. Salvation becomes a very personal matter. We hear much about having Jesus Christ as our personal savior, the one who came to die for us in order to make possible God's forgiveness and eventual entrance into heaven.

Now I'm speaking about Advent and Christmas in traditional terms. I could have you open the hymnbook and over and over again I could demonstrate the primary focus of our Christian faith as we have learned it.

God so loved the world that God gave the son - Born a child of Mary, to live for us and die for us and bring us to heaven. Annually we are immersed in the story of one born a child who became a King - a King who will be coming in blinding glory to judge and rule and bring us to heaven. I'm not really telling you anything new. This is the old, old story. God's gift of Jesus, our savior, to take away our sins and open heaven's gates.

And what about this in-between time, this time between his first coming and his coming again? Well, it is a time for the Gospel to be preached, a time to offer the salvation God has provided through Jesus' death and resurrection.

The story is about a spiritual Kingdom, about salvation, about heaven. There are present responsibilities - to preach the Gospel, to work for human well-being, acts of charity and the alleviation of suffering. But, essentially, there is no hope for this old world, this present age, this earthly reality of which we are a part. The world is simply reeling toward hell. It will be destroyed; we must be saved out of the world.

But, what if we get it wrong? What if we missed the point of Jesus? What if we made a religious cult out of what Jesus intended as a revolutionary movement of world transformation? What if we got all bogged down with sin and guilt and threat of damnation when Jesus was about social, economic and spiritual transformation?

Let me read a description of the world. See if you recognize it.

... a world where dreams of limitless material wealth and technological progress danced in the heads of the great entrepreneurs and in the rhetoric of ambitious politicians - and where the looming nightmares of family breakdown, crime, sudden loss of livelihood, and untreated and untreatable illnesses plagued the minds of the vast majority. It was, in short, a world that should seem ominously familiar - in which sweeping social and economic change was embraced by some and condemned by others, dramatically transforming the life of all the empire's people, from the wealthiest nobles in their palaces to the poorest shepherds wandering with their flocks in the hills. This is becoming increasingly clear because modern scholars have at last begun to explore the vast area covered by the rule and civilization of the Caesars to search for the life styles of *both* the rich and famous and the far larger, yet mostly hidden, world of the Roman havenots, peasants, plebians, and slaves.

Richard Horsley, *The Message and the Kingdom*, p. 2F. As this citation begins, one might think one is reading a description of life at the end of the 20th Century,

but it is, as becomes clear, a description of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' life in the occupied land of Israel.

Through archeological exploration and cross-cultural studies we are gaining a wealth of information about the ancient world of Jesus' time and beginning to understand the poverty and suffering of the lower classes which formed the vast majority of the population. Occupied by a foreign power, exploited by the imperial rule through taxation and land appropriation, there was a brewing cauldron of frustration and anger. And, where was god? What if the promises of prophets of a new creation, of a time of prosperity and peace - the shalom of the peaceable Kingdom when swords and spears would be changed into implements of agriculture? Where was God? When would this awful suffering cease?

Is it not a natural human question and normal human response? Why, O Lord, why? How long, O God, how long?" Well, one answer - a common one found in the Hebrew prophets was that Israel was suffering for its sin. That is how Jeremiah explained the Babylonian Exile. I could cite passage after passage from the prophetic book - You have sinned; God is punishing. But, why should the righteous suffer? Another solution must be found. And thus the rise of the idea that the world was in the grip of an evil power. For the time being, God was allowing Satan to hold sway creating havoc in history, the suffering that was everywhere. But God would not always remain passive. God would act. God would intervene.

This was the origin of Apocalypticism - *Apocalypse* - meaning "unveiling" or "revelation." God would intervene in history; God's judgment and grace would be unveiled or revealed. In the cauldron of suffering and discontent, there was the feverish expectation of the exploited and suffering masses when John the Baptist preached. And John was not the only one. There was a widespread anticipation of God's dramatic intervention to destroy the evil one and all the agents of oppression and darkness and the vindication and salvation of the suffering righteous.

We noted John's preaching of the coming Kingdom in the last sermon - God would wreak vengeance on the enemies and oppressors of God's people, whether foreign agents or native collaborators. This was the angry God of Isaiah 34, a God whose cup of wrath was filled up, ready to overflow in burning judgment.

Jesus came to John to be baptized. Jesus was caught up in the Baptist movement, himself baptizing down the river a piece. After a time, he distanced himself from John and his preaching took on a different note - a grace note.

There is a wonderful debate going on in the circle of historical Jesus scholarship as to whether Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet like John or not. We will have that issue debated here next March when Dom Crossan and Amy-Jill Levine discuss Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But, whether or to what degree Jesus

was part of the apocalyptic expectation, this would seem to be certain - Jesus was dealing with earth, not heaven, this life, not some life to come, concrete, down to earth human existence, not some spiritual Kingdom in another dimension.

Jesus left John the Baptist because he pointed to an alternative vision of God and called for an alternative community. Luke writes his Gospel with an opening scene of Jesus' ministry in which he announces what he is about.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

John's hope was an apocalyptic hope of imminent judgment and salvation from beyond. For Jesus, that was a hope too narrow. I used the word tribal last week. Religion tends to become tribal - our God looking after our well-being and destroying our enemies. God on our side. God favoring and saving us. God giving us the truth, the way to salvation: others need not apply.

For Jesus, that was a hope too narrow. Jesus embodied a larger hope. In his home synagogue in Nazareth, they were not happy with the expansiveness of his vision and hope. He pointed to an Elijah story where the Sidonian widow was provided for in famine, and the Elisha story where the Syrian Naaman was healed of his leprosy, thus pointing to the broader swath of God's care and concern. The hometown folk were not happy about God's wider grace and their anger rose against Jesus.

Jesus lived by and offered a larger hope from which no one was excluded. There were no outcasts in Jesus' purview. He pointed to a God whose grace was of expansive embrace.

But, the grace he offered was the grace that created human dignity and worth to people who had lost their dignity and all hope. The Kingdom is in the midst of you, he told them. This is the year of the Lord's favor. To the poor, the blind and the lame, he brought the Good News of God's presence and called the people to care for one another.

This was an appeal to the traditional covenantal life of Isaiah, to community of mutual respect and care.

And the life to which Jesus called the people was revolutionary in its impact. He touched the anger, frustration and despair of the people, but in a positive way of giving them dignity and solidarity before their oppressors - the covenant ideal of Israel where God was King alone and the people lived in covenant community. That was Jesus' larger hope - a hope that embraced all.

This was the Kingdom that was already present for Jesus, in the towns and villages, if only people recognized its sanctity and reoriented their community accordingly - They were poor, oppressed, fragmented. They were disoriented and dislocated. They had lost hope and they forgot how to live in community. Jesus called them to remember who they were and to reclaim their lives as children of God. He called for an alternative community, an alternative society.

Jesus was not a revolutionary of the type that was certainly present -the guerilla bands that roamed the Palestinian hills, the Zealots that pressed for armed conflict against Rome - and eventually in revolt brought out the legions of Rome that destroyed Jewishness in 70 C.E.

But Jesus was revolutionary in calling for the transformation of human society. This is why he was proved too dangerous to let live. This is why he was crucified. That he was revolutionary has been proved in our own time by those who learned civil disobedience from him.

First of all, people must be given a sense of themselves - their dignity and worth as human beings, as children of God. Then they can resist, non-violently, passive resistance, civil disobedience, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the South African Black Church - all examples of Jesus' Way.

Jesus was not tribal. He had not a hope too narrow. Jesus had a larger hope for human transformation in this down-to-earth concrete reality of history. Jesus gave people hope for the transformation of their life here and now.

That is a striking fact. Do you at all sense how revolutionary and radical that is? It should give us pause.

Who is Caesar? Who is Herod? Who are the Priests and Sanhedrin? Who has the legions and the swords?

Who are the poor whom Jesus called to awareness of their human dignity and thus to their birthright as children of God?

How are we doing as the Millennium turns? We are the rich and powerful. Jesus was engaged with concrete human social, economic, and religious conditions. Then, can we honestly make him into a savior of a spiritual Kingdom whose issue is heaven?

Wherein lies the hope for the world? Will it not call for transformation - social, political, economic? The world could be transformed - what if the vision was caught not by the poor and powerless, but by the rich and famous?

I can't think about it too long and hard. I would have to change. Better simply to go once more to Bethlehem and see him as God's gift to save us from our sins and bring us to heaven - And forget about what he was really about.

