

The Thrill of Hope
Advent 1
December 1, 2018

We are starting to see the signs all around us, the signs that Advent is here and Christmas is coming. You can see it here in the Sanctuary- last week we had our Tree of Thanks with its brightly colored leaves. Now it has been replaced by the Advent wreath, the garlands and greenery, and of course the Moravian Star. They are all signs that it is time for us to prepare for Jesus. God is coming into the world.

The signs of Advent that we see all around us are very different from the signs that Jesus speaks of when he said: *“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”* This morning I want to look at how, despite being very different, the signs of Jesus’ first coming and his second are pointing us in the same direction.

We love to see the signs of Jesus first coming, the signs of Advent and Christmas. In fact we love them so much that we seem to look for them earlier and earlier every year. We need the hope that they bring to us. We are ready to follow in the direction where they are leading us. But the signs that Jesus is speaking about in our Scripture reading are not something that we want to see. *“Distress among the nations...the roaring of the sea and the waves...people fainting from fear and foreboding... the powers of the heavens shaken.”* Those are signs that cause us to want to run away and hide, not follow them to see where they lead. They don’t give us that thrill of hope that the signs of Advent and Christmas do.

Yet, they are signs of the same thing. We love the signs that are around us in this sanctuary, in our homes and in our community, because they remind us that Jesus is

coming into the world, they remind us the Christ the Savior is born. It was Jesus himself, when he was in the world, living among us, who said that all of those other things, the frightening and disturbing things. They too are signs that Jesus is coming into the world, that we will soon “see *‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*”

We just sang almost those very words in our liturgy “*Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates, behold the King of Glory waits, the King of Kings is drawing near, the Savior of the world is here.*” But we like to think of our savior more as the baby laying in the manger, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, than we do as the Son of Man coming in a cloud.

Perhaps that is why the first time that God came into the world he did so as a baby. The idea of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, of God becoming human, is just too much for us to comprehend, it’s too overwhelming, even too scary. So God first did it quietly, gently, inauspiciously. He let Jesus ease into the world—heralded by angels but welcomed only by shepherds and eventually a few “kings” from foreign lands. And even as he grew and began his ministry and preached and taught and healed, he still didn’t attract much attention, only enough to get him on the wrong side of the authorities and lead them to crucify him.

It wasn’t until his first “second coming” when he rose from death that he began to attract attention. Of course, now the name of Jesus is known around the world and he is worshiped by millions. So maybe that is why he speaks of his coming again in such dramatic ways. Perhaps that is why he needs it to sound so disturbing. That’s why he will come with power and for all to see. Because millions of people are looking for him, waiting for his return. If he comes again in the same way he came before, we might miss it.

But if Jesus comes again in the way that he said that he would- coming on a cloud with power and great glory, preceded by signs in the sun, the moon, the stars, causing distress on the earth and people fainting from fear and foreboding, then no one will be able to overlook or ignore that kind of arrival. But I kind of doubt that we will call it the “most wonderful time of the year.”

The second coming of Jesus is one of the things that most preachers would prefer to ignore- it is just too unsettling, too disturbing, too unknown to try to deal with or explain. So we focus on the first coming, on what is pastoral and comforting and familiar- the baby in the manger, the shepherds and the angels, the goodwill to all and peace on the earth.

Yet, I'm sure that his second coming is something that can not be ignored. It is a fact that Jesus is going to return. He said so himself, many times. The kingdom of God is near, it will come upon all who live on the whole earth- not just in an isolated community in a limited part of the world. But he will come with power and for all to see. However we really don't know what it will be like. We don't know the specifics, we aren't sure of the details. We just know that he is coming again and it will be different from when he came before.

We can take solace in the fact that God is good and that Jesus loves us. He is coming to us not to scare us or disturb us or destroy us but to comfort us, to save us, to redeem us. To do the same things that he did the first time. Our redemption is again drawing near. The first time Jesus came into the world, he brought us salvation, he brought us redemption. Yet not everyone received him, not everyone believed him. And still today, not everyone receives him, not everyone believes him. So he is coming again. And we need to watch for the signs of his coming.

Today is all about hope. The First Sunday of Advent is all about Hope. Hope is doing something, believing in something without being sure of the outcome. And it is fitting that we are talking about hope today as we consider the second coming of Jesus. We can't really have hope in the first coming. As Paul wrote to the Romans: *For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

We can't have hope in the first coming of Jesus because it has already happened. Jesus was already born in Bethlehem, he was already raised by Mary and Joseph, he already called his first disciples and taught them, he has already healed the sick and given sight to the blind, he has already been betrayed and denied, he has already been crucified and died. He has already been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. We can't have hope in those things because they have already happened. For who hopes for what is seen? Though we haven't seen them, we have faith in them, we know that they are true.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The people of Israel were hoping for a Savior and their hopes were fulfilled in the life, sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus. And we can have hope in the promises of Jesus that he will return and bring redemption to all the world and make the kingdom of God the kingdom of the earth. That is really what all of the "signs" of Advent are about. They are reminders that God has kept his promises to his people before and that he will keep them again.

The signs that are around us today- the Advent wreath, the garlands and greenery, and of course the Moravian Star- and the signs that Jesus tells us to be watching for "Distress among the nations...the roaring of the sea and the waves...people fainting from fear and foreboding... the powers of the heavens shaken." all of these are signs of faith and signs of hope.

As we enter into this Advent season we need to look for the signs. Not the signs of faith, not SOLELY the signs of faith, of the things that God has already done. But the signs of the things that he has done and is promising to do again- like bringing light into the darkness, redeeming the world. The signs of hope.

In fact, I think we have what is the greatest sign of hope, the greatest sign of the coming of Jesus- both the first and the second coming. This points us to Jesus, it shows us the way to him, the way to salvation, the way to redemption.

HOLD UP CANDLE

But it needs some help. It needs something more to make it a true sign of hope, a true symbol of the things that God has done and promises to do again. It needs this--- HOLD UP RED TRIM. To remind us that not only has Jesus come into the world and brought salvation to us through his blood shed on the cross, but that he will return and bring redemption to all.

And it needs this LIGHT THE CANDLE. To remind us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness can not and will not ever overcome it.

And it needs US. It needs us to put it all together, as I just did with this candle. The signs of hope, all of the signs of Jesus first coming and the signs of his second coming need us to put them together, to interpret them so that people will be able to see them and understand them for what they truly are and what they truly do- point us to Jesus.

It is now up to us to prepare the way of the Lord. To share the signs of his coming and the signs of coming again- the signs of faith, the signs of hope, the signs of peace, the signs of joy, the signs of love. That is something that I love about Advent. It gives us the chance to prepare to share the signs of Jesus coming into the world. We

can do so literally today as we join together to trim the candles for our Christmas lovefeasts. And we can do so as we gather together throughout the 12 Days of Service, as we come and worship, as we serve and live in the light of the knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ. We join together to share the thrill of hope with this weary world.

So I want to challenge you today. I want to challenge you to be here. To be present as we prepare the way of the Lord. For the world is looking to us, our community is looking to us to see Jesus, to see the signs of hope. The world is weary, life is hard and difficult and dark and scary. Our neighbors need hope, they need comfort, they need redemption, they need light. They need us to show them the signs that show the way to Jesus.