

Sermon 17 December 2017  
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Mark 13:24-37

Our friend Jay Wallace visited us earlier this month, and he and I made time for a cup of coffee. Jay has preached for us several times in recent years; he always brings a word of grace and good news. He is a burley man with a big heart. Just as we were getting ready to leave the coffee shop Jay told me about a pastor friend of his and how he answers the familiar question, “How are you?”

You know the ready stock of answers we have for that question. “I’m fine,” or “I’m doing well,” or “Hanging in there.” More often than not the question is more part of a simple greeting than an invitation to a full report—and any answer will do. But Jay’s friend offers a gentle jolt to the meeting.

“How are you?” someone asks.  
The good preacher responds, “Hopeful.”

I like that. Actually, I think it may be the best response I’ve ever heard. It is an ideal answer for a Christian—or for any person of faith. Even when we aren’t *“fine”* or when we aren’t *“doing well,”* even when we’re barely *“hanging in there,”* we can be hopeful.

That’s the reason Jesus told stories about the end times. There are some dreadful images in all those stories, whether they come from Daniel, Mark or Revelation, and at their best those images emphasize how important it is to be faithful and to stay the course when our faith is tested. It is a natural human tendency to focus on the dark and dreadful prophecies of judgment—they are clear warnings to anyone who listens. *The choices we make matter. How we live matters. There are consequences to the choices we make; there are consequences to the ways we live. There is a day of reckoning for every one of us.*

Of course there are many days of reckoning—but the *end time* stories tell us that history is not a random jumble of events heading nowhere. Call it *karma* or *destiny*—the rule applies—in one way or another, *we reap what we sow.*

The dark and dreadful parts of the story are warnings of the inevitability of judgment. *Watch. Stay awake. Be ready.* We are accountable.

But those who hear the story best know dread is not the dominant note of the story. Jesus speaks to those who are struggling to stay the course, to keep the faith.

*At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.*

That is what the disciples hear. They hear that nothing in the world can separate them from the promise—nothing will thwart the ultimate vindication of God’s love and the realization of God’s redemption. They have hope. No matter what they go through, no matter what is happening in the world around them—the signature at the end of the story is God’s.

We live in such a challenging time. There are wars and rumors of wars. Cataclysmic natural disasters tear up communities and shatter dreams—hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires rage and devastate. Torturously warped and damaged individuals and groups lash out at strangers with bombs and bullets and knives, killing even innocent children. Some of our children are caught in the crushing grip of addiction or despair. How can it be that children and entire families are dying from hunger when our restaurants and we throw away tons of food every day? The list seems endless.

For too many of our brothers and sisters around the world and in our own country, *the sun is darkened, and the moon does not give its light.*

Jesus tells his story to give his people hope in the midst of desperate times, in the face of despair. When someone asks a child of God, *“How are you?”* they can answer, *“Hopeful.”*

You and I cultivate our hope when we come to worship, when we pray, when we help others in the name of Christ, when we encourage

one another with simple words or caring silence. The hope grows in us and takes deep root in the presence of God's nudging Spirit—nudging us to trust and to stay the course—even in the most contrary of times.

Here are some verses from scripture that nudge and nurture us in hope.

Hear this from Psalm 42:11.

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?*

*Why so disturbed within me?*

*Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him,  
my Savior and my God.*

Hear this from Romans 12:12.

*Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray  
at all times.*

Hear these words of promise from Jeremiah 29:11.

*I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and  
not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for.*

We should saturate our imaginations with sacred words like these.

You and I, we are people of hope, called to be purveyors of hope. My favorite evangelistic scripture comes from 1 Peter 3:15; it speaks of the power of our hope.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give  
the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and  
respect.*

Thursday night I was at the Redstone Inn for a short retreat. I went for a walk that afternoon and when I returned I saw a notice on the board about a scotch tasting scheduled that evening. "Humm," I thought. I joined the assembly early, and before long about 20 local

people were there, mostly men. We sampled and we talked. I, of course, told them I was the Methodist pastor in Eagle, and whether it was the scotch or something else, no one leaned away. To one degree or another everyone leaned in.

At the end of the evening the Inn's manager sat down with me and we began to talk. It began with simple, general questions about faith, but moved into deeper, more personal concerns. I don't think the scotch made me more coherent, but the Spirit was kind to keep me from being blithering. Before long, the room was empty except for the two of us. We talked about Jesus and we talked about people of other faiths. We talked about faith and love—and we talked about hope. It came down to shared thoughts about hope for our nation, the world, ourselves—the present and the future.

People are hungry for hope. Many still cling to hope in false promises, the false gods of the world that promise so much and, in the end, deliver nothing. But you and I have another kind of hope. It is hope fueled by our faith in the resurrection of Jesus, in the promises of God realized in the Son. My soul rejoices in hope.

And so . . . “How are you?” on this third Sunday in Advent? “How are you?” this morning? *“How are you?”*

(Hopeful, I hope.)