

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, November 28, 2021
First Sunday in Advent**

“Where in the World Do We Find Hope These Days?”

First of a four-part sermon series entitled “O Come, Advent”

Lighting the Candle of ‘Hope’

Christian Scripture: Luke 21:25-36



Jesus said, “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (Luke 21:25-26). Alright, who is now in the mood for a very merry Christmas?! Just as we anticipate celebrating Christmas, our reading recalls Jesus seemingly describing a nightmare, a disaster, a calamity of, well, biblical proportions! What are the scholars who decided the lectionary

reading something to have picked such a depressing scripture on this Sunday that celebrates, of all things, 'hope'?

'Hope' is next to useless when things are going well. 'Hope' most matters when things really suck. And friends, things really suck right now. Inflation is at 6%. The COVID pandemic seems to be coming back, for what?, its third or fourth wave. Now the World Health Organization is concerned about a new worrying virus variant coming-out of South Africa called 'Omicron'. I know that many young people whose high school and college years have been for so long disrupted are suffering from many forms of mental illness. They have little hope for their vocational or financial futures; many are not wanting to get ever be married or have children. Parents are fearful that schools will be closed again. Governments are guilty of culpable inertia when it comes to addressing the real and dire environmental state of the planet and global warming. If you think immigration problems are bad now, what is happening in Europe and on our southern border will soon seem like a picnic. United States' politics are so polarized that I do not see a means by which we can avoid a civil war and/or the loss of our democracy in the next national election. As the first verse of our Advent song that we sang together laments, we are in a time when "chaos and confusion still reign". Friends, I need 'hope' more than ever right now. So, 'where in the world do we find hope these days?'"

In order to understand our scripture, we have to, have to, have to realize that Jesus, his disciples, the apostle Paul, and his contemporaries all believed the end of the world was soon coming. In fact, they believed they would witness the *parousia*, the apocalypse, the end-times during their lifetimes.¹ Jesus and Paul state that ‘this generation’ would experience it (Luke 21:32 and 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

The Rev Dr Cheryl Lindsay teaches us “Surely, there were those who have heard these words and felt a sense of foreboding. Some, [then and today], may feel threatened. But, there [was then] and is [now] an audience that probably welcomes [a divine rupture]. Those who already live in a world of terror wouldn’t mind the Holy One coming to shake things up. When the status quo [of unregulated capitalism and a resurgence of white supremacy] has [their] heels on your neck, you don’t mind a disruption that breaks their grip on your world. [Today’s reading] is a word of profound hope, not for those who are comfortable, but for the marginalized, whom Luke demonstrates that God has a preference to uplift and redeem”.²

The early Christians understood that God will save when times will be at their worst. When things look their bleakest, the faithful will be redeemed, and all

¹ Ancient Greek word meaning ‘presence’, ‘arrival’, or ‘official visit’, that is, in a Christian context, ‘the Second Coming’ of Christ.

² The Rev Dr Cheryl Lindsay, “Sermon Seeds: Signs”, *Worship Ways*, Sunday, November 28, 2021. Found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-signs/>, accessed November 27, 2021.

will be made right in the world; the kin-dom of God will be established. This is why Jesus specifically stated when the proverbial pooh hits the fan, “your redemption is near”.

This brings us to the question, ‘Where in the world do we find hope these days?’

As a person of faith, ‘I find hope in the Christ, who at one time was manifested in Jesus, and who lives and breathes through all people’. Therefore, I find hope in my children; I find hope in all of you who worship at Centre Church despite that few others belong to a faith community in our state; I find hope in Loaves & Fishes despite the food insecurity in our country. I find hope at the Brattleboro Centre for Children despite the number of children who are at risk. I find hope at Groundworks Collaborative despite the number of homeless people. I find hope in the lives of the Afghan immigrants who are coming to Brattleboro to start again despite the ongoing tragedy occurring in their country. I find hope in Margo’s environmental fellowship despite the disappointing recent COP 26 climate summit. Despite almost 800,000 deaths, I find hope in the doctors and nurses who soldier-on fighting a virus as well as obscene obstinacy fueled by insidious political misinformation. I find hope in as many, if not more, places and people as I find despair. Our scripture teaches us that *real* hope can only be found in the midst of despair.

One of the reasons why I find hope in God is because I don't believe God loses. God created this universe. If God can create a universe, I don't believe God would create one that would not achieve God's purpose. Why would God set God's-self up to fail – at anything?! God works in and through you and I to achieve God's will or purpose in the world. And God does not lose. God is the creator of the purpose. God participates in the purpose with us. God determines if the purpose is fulfilled. So, how could it be that God could ever lose?

In the Hebrew Testament readings from Isaiah that the Keller family read for us and from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear of God's will and it is fulfilled against all odds and in the midst of despair. The Davidic kingdom was destroyed with the fall of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Yet, Jeremiah states: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jeremiah 33:14-15). In the scripture the Kellers read for us, all was lost, all had sinned, all had drawn themselves away from God. Yet, still, the prophet Isaiah in his pleas proclaimed hope: "Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people" (Isaiah 64:9).

In the midst of destruction, Jeremiah's hope is in God. In the midst of faithlessness, Isaiah's hope is in God. In the midst of the collapse of the cosmos, Luke's hope is in God. God does not lose. Thus, our hope is also in God, manifested as the Christ in human form.

This Advent season, ask Christ to come into your spirit. Say to God during these next four weeks of Advent, "Come, Emmanuel" ('God with Us'). Pray "Dwell with us. Dwell within me". My prayer for all of you is that you have hope in this world of despair. The best way to have hope is to allow the Christ who dwells in you to make **you, you**, the hope of the world.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"