

**The Christian Obligation to Hope** Reading: Mark 13:24-37 Advent 1B  
The Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 12/03/23

Have you ever heard the phrase, "The world is going to hell in a handbasket?" Have you ever had that thought yourself? *Going to Hell in A Handbasket* means that the world appears to be rapidly deteriorating and is set on a course for disaster. Since the beginning of time, disaster has struck the universe in many ways. Billions of years ago, the world witnessed the explosion of multiple stars in the galaxy. Millions of years ago, there were five mass extinction periods on earth, killing 90% of the earth's biodiversity, including the dinosaurs.

Other massive disasters in more recent history include the Plague of Justinian during the 6<sup>th</sup> C that killed almost 50% of the population in the Eastern Roman Empire. Then there was the black plague in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century followed by the smallpox epidemic in the early 1600's. World War I, World War II, and the Rwanda genocide were responsible for over 80 million deaths. Today, our world is struggling with multiple wars, the effects of climate change, COVID and other epidemics. For those who have lost their lives due to these tragedies, the world indeed has come to an end! Many of us wonder when the Light of the World will overcome the darkness that threatens to end life as we know it.

Today's gospel reading speaks to the early Christian community who is disheartened. They are suffering from great losses arising from religious persecution and a difficult political environment. After the Great Fire of Rome in 64AD, the emperor Nero tried to blame that fire on the city's small Christian community. In response, he burned many of them alive. By 70 AD, the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman Army had begun. It ended with the Romans destroying the city and demolishing the 2nd Jewish Temple.

It is into this context of despair, mixed with hope for the second coming of Christ, that Mark reminds his community of Jesus' words regarding the end of times: "In those days, after that suffering...they will see the "Son of Man" coming in clouds with great power and glory...But about that day or hour no one knows...And what I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake." This passage in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of Mark is known as apocalyptic writing. It speaks to the end of times. This kind of prophecy is associated with periods of difficult political and social crises. The basic message of apocalyptic writing is this: The forces of evil that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God are in operation. Things will get worse before they get better. But hold onto hope just a little bit longer, because just when you are sure you cannot endure, God will intervene to turn the world right side up."

In November of 1999, I was having my carpets cleaned. I had found a good carpet cleaner who did a thorough job. Since my carpets were an off-white color, he came to the house frequently. He belonged to one of those cultic groups who believed that the end of the world was near and so he and his congregation were waiting anxiously for the second coming of Christ. Because the year 2000 was just around the corner, he was hopeful that Jesus would come soon and take him and other faithful people up to heaven. According to his theology, those who had been unfaithful and those who remained unbelievers, would be left behind to suffer in a painful world.

During past visits, this carpet cleaner would often preach to me, making sure I knew what would happen when Jesus finally came. But on this particular day, he seemed a bit out of sorts. So I asked him if he would be disappointed if the year 2000 came and went and the world continued as usual. His countenance fell and he shook his head *yes*. You see, he had been gazing up to heaven for years, waiting for Jesus to return. He didn't seem happy in this life and my hunch is, he wanted to be released from all the disappointments in life. Maybe he didn't want to be a carpet cleaner. Maybe he had mental health issues. Maybe he was lonely or his heart was broken. Maybe he struggled financially or was bullied. Maybe he had experienced a significant trauma during the Vietnam War. I do not know his personal history, but what I do know is that he was waiting for Jesus to come back and did not want to be left behind. So instead of setting long term goals or trying to make this world a better place now, he was waiting for an apocalypse to release him from pains of this world. If only he could have cultivated hope as a way to guard his thoughts against the forces of skepticism and despair!

Today's gospel gives us an insight into the wisdom of the early Christian community. These folks experienced a radical disconnect between what Jesus preached and the oppressive domination system of their day. On the one hand, Jesus envisioned a time when healing and compassion would become the dominant themes such that the blind see, the lame walk, the poor are fed, the oppressed are liberated, and all people are given the opportunity to live a full life. Instead, the early Christians experienced oppression, imprisonment, and the total disregard for human life by those who were in power. In response, they armed themselves with hope by envisioning a transformed future. They believed however, that such a future would require the physical return of the "second coming of Christ in all its glory." While I too long for a transformed future, I believe that Jesus Christ has already returned in the Resurrection. So for me, "the coming of Christ in all its glory" will be realized as humanity (along with all political, economic, religious, and cultural institutions) are healed in such a way that compassion, truth, justice, and peace are the operating principles.

So how can we be active participants in God's healing work in the interim? How can we shine the light on others to alleviate their darkness in the present? How can we generate hope when it seems as if the world is going to hell in a handbasket? It has a lot to do with actively striving for justice and the dignity of every human being in ourselves and in all of our institutions. It has to do with sowing the seeds of compassion through acts of kindness, acts of generosity, acts of listening, acts of helping, acts of giving, acts of forgiveness, and acts of repentance. It has a lot to do with practicing gratitude for what we do have. As Bishop Charleston recently said: "The time has come for awareness to grow and love to expand. For people to work together. For the hungry to be fed. For a global awareness to shift the vision of the world. The time has come for all of these blessings and more. Let us proclaim it. Let us live into it. The time has come for the renewal of creation."

Life shouldn't be as heartbreaking as it is today. We shouldn't be at each other's throats, witnessing one horrific global act after another that scars our heart and makes us numb. In the face of this kind of adversity, when the whirlwind of despair threatens to engulf us, hope becomes our beacon of resilience. Hope is the unyielding belief that, no matter how stormy the seas, the dawn of a new day is inevitable. Hope is not a mere wish; it is a force that propels us forward, urging us to transcend our circumstances and reach for a brighter tomorrow. For without hope, the human heart would break!

In a recent article, Summerlee Staten claims that Christians have a holy obligation to hope just as we have an obligation to love. Hope is having the confidence that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present. "In this time of waiting, we are called to be active participants in God's healing work in the world today — to be God's hands and feet to those in need. Called to be peacemakers in times of conflict. Called to be the light of the world." (Summerlee Staten)

Today, is the first Sunday of the season of Advent, a time to nurture our hearts for the coming of Christ within. It is also a time to hope and actively work toward a different world order, one in which the lion and the lamb lie down together, where the lowly are lifted up. So how can you cultivate hope in your sphere of influence?

For me, I like to do something concrete to sustain hope. When the citizens of Israel were killed by Hamas and the people of Palestine were forced out of their homes, I was moved with compassion for both sides. I was also pained by all the medical injuries perpetrated on the Palestinian civilians by the invading army. So I sent money to support the Ahli hospital in Gaza, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese in Jerusalem. Then I then wrote to my congressman, senators, and President about the need to deal effectively with the humanitarian crisis. It was a very small act on my part but it showed a posture of hope rather than despair. You see, God is calling all of us to shine a light during this season of Advent as a gesture of hope. How will you do that?

"Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility..."

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