



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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**Sermon: November 29, 2009**

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**Where Our Hopes and Fears Meet, Robert B. Culp**

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

It is a very strange time of the year. The other day Kathy and I were out running some errands and enjoying some of the hustle and bustle of the season. When we got into the car and started to head back home, in my tiredness I remarked to Kathy that I wished we would have gotten an earlier start, as it was pitch black and so late. She said, “Bob, it’s only 5:00!” I mumbled, though, that it felt like the middle of the night to me.

Darkness descends earlier and earlier this time of the year, and it seems that the sunlight is being crowded out far too effectively by the enveloping shadows of the approaching winter. Indeed, when we lighted the first candle on the Advent Wreath this morning, I don’t think it was a moment too soon!

It is odd, isn’t it, that the most hopeful season in the Christian year begins in the midst of a pervasive darkness. And this year, perhaps more than at other times, there is an urgent need for the gracious light that comes from God. I don’t think I am the only one who is longing for the radiant joy of Christmas this year, for these are difficult and challenging days accented by a troubling darkness:

- \* the warring conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that have gone on for so long, with the world appearing to be more broken than ever;
- \* high unemployment rates and the increasing misery for those struggling to put food on the table;
- \* continued economic uncertainties at home and abroad, casting unsettling doubts and questions about the future;
- \* exorbitant bonuses being doled out, random shootings fracturing families and towns, publicity-seeking party crashers at the White House.

Sometimes, you wonder what the world is coming to. Somebody recently said that the clouds of anxiety are hovering so close and low these days that you can barely see your hand in front of your face this November.

It is also odd that the first Sunday in Advent, so close to Thanksgiving, marks the beginning of a new liturgical year for the Christian Church. Forget the confetti, party streamers, and champagne, though, and bring on the apocalypse! For our new lectionary set of scripture texts invites us to spend our first Advent Sunday considering the end of the world.

Thus it is that we begin our preparations for the coming of the Christ Child with a heart-stopping passage in which Jesus speaks of signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth – distress among the nations, with people fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming into the world – “then they shall see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory.”

Now ... most times that kind of language would make me want to crawl under my bed

and stay there. But this year I find myself holding on for dear life, for I'm aching for the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again. Interestingly, Jeremiah's words this morning bring with them a resonant note of consolation or reassurance: "The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promises that I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah."

It is a wonder that the prophet Jeremiah somehow found in himself the strength and vision to look upon the future and be filled with hope. His people were under siege at the hands of the Babylonians, corruption in high places was making a mockery of justice in the land, and there was nowhere you could look and see any sign of hope. But Jeremiah was not discouraged. He was confident that God fully intended to finish the promised work of redemption and to overthrow everything that was chaotic and cruel and destructive about the present order, so that shalom and wholeness could be ushered into the world. You see, somehow our faith invites us to trust that when it comes to God, if God says something will happen, it will surely happen.

As you know, our age seems fascinated by the prospects of the end of the world, as witness the many movies (2012) and books (Left Behind series) dealing with such a topic, and the almost cult-like status of some millennialists. But I wonder whether these folk are motivated less by hope than by the desire to see those whom they consider to be God's "unfavored" get their just desserts.

A pastor's friend once saw a sign along a country road in front of a bait shop in northern Georgia that read, "Smile, our God is a consuming fire!" Another sign read, "The Lord is coming soon ... and he's not a happy camper!" I much prefer, though, the comments of Martin Luther King who counseled us how to think about the future in relation to these present days when he said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."

Concerning the promised advent of Christ, we may wonder if his coming is bad news for some, or if it is good news for all. Without any question, Jesus indicates that it will be a fearful thing for just about everyone when the powers of heaven are shaken. But then he goes on to say that when these things happen all around us, we are to take heart because the dawn of our redemption, the coming of our deliverance is drawing near. Not our destruction, but our redemption. Jesus' message is a strange commingling of warning and comfort.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" has been a favorite carol of mine since early childhood. Written by the American clergyman Phillips Brooks in 1868 following his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, it contains a line that for me continues to gather up the deeper meanings of the birth of Jesus: "Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight."

The hopes and fears of all the years ... This year, it seems to me, is a year when both our hopes and fears particularly have been brought to the surface of our cultural life, and into very sharp focus for all of us. For as much as we have been stirred deeply by the audacity of hope in the realms of national and international affairs under a new administration, we also have been troubled profoundly by the darkness of fear and uncertainty in such realms ... and by the swirl of feelings and passions and questions rumbling about inside.

We know much about fear these days, if not from the daily headlines, then certainly within the unfolding dramas of our own lives as we seek to chart out a safe and trustworthy course upon the choppy seas of our times. Indeed, we are well aware that fear can be the great enemy of life, a great impediment to love and hope, passion and joy ... and it is with us each day.

Rather than focusing upon fear this morning, though, I would like to lift up the importance of our living expectantly in hope. Instead of hiding from the turmoil in the smallness of our fears, we are called by our Lord to stand tall amidst all the confusion with our heads up, looking for the future God has in store for us, expecting light in the midst of the darkness. In other words, we are called to wait in hope for a tomorrow that is greater than we can cre-

ate ourselves. You see, Christmas is not about diminished, puny little expectations within our squeezed-in hearts. Rather, it is about a God who will not stop until everything has been set right.

And it is our job to look for signs of that “setting right” in the here and now, like the fresh green leaves that appear on the fig tree. We are to keep our eyes open, for there are signs all around that God is remaking the world. But we are not just to look ... but to do something. I love what St. Augustine wrote about the nature of hope: “Hope has two daughters,” he said. “One daughter’s name is Anger; the other daughter’s name is Courage. Anger at what is but ought not to be, and Courage to make what ought to be come to be.”

Jesus counseled his followers to be on guard, be alert, stay awake. So we watch and work, and it is in those two ways that we wait. Of course, we know what the work is – it is hope in action. As we love our neighbors and our enemies, as we help support the poor and hungry in concrete ways, as we support the weak with our dollars and our personal touch, as we honor other people by respecting differences and listening to them ... the Spirit of Christ is born. It is in this way that I believe in the Second Coming. Because in our acts of mercy and our commitment to justice for all people, our Lord comes again and again and again.

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table on this first Sunday in Advent, let us be filled with hope. Let us be hopeful that through the power of the Holy Spirit we will leave this service more hopeful people than we were when we came in out of the cold this morning ... and that Jesus, through his resurrection power, may already have overthrown all that may hurt and separate us from God ... and that there is a kingdom somewhere where the least among us truly gets to be first in line.

I hope, too, that when we come forward to the Lord’s Table, we will do so not as a perfunctory exercise, but that we will receive the gift of Christ’s abiding, sacramental presence ... that he will be made known to each one of us, really known, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. For the promise is that these elements of God’s grace will feed every hunger in our souls. May our spirits be filled with great joy and bright hope as we affirm that Christ has died, that Christ has risen, and by God’s grace, Christ will come again and again and again.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, help us look for a light in the darkness, and may we be that light ... by your power. Help us to look for a sign of hope amid the gloom of our anxieties and fears, and may we be that sign ... by your grace. May we look for our Living Lord descending to be with us, even as the very foundations shake beneath us ... and to trust the eternal promise of Advent that we know in Jesus Christ. Amen.