

December 2, 2018  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Worship Fully”

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Luke 21:25-36

25 "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. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

## *Worship Fully*

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of a new church year. A new year is often a time when we feel a sense of possibility, of newness, which runs counter to what is happening outside, where daylight is waning, and the cold is creeping in. It can be hard, in this season, to feel a sense of newness and possibility... hard to hold on to what the first Sunday of Advent promises us: HOPE. If you are having trouble holding on to hope, no one will blame you.

Here is just a sampling of news headlines from the past week:

The Insect Apocalypse Is Here

Overdose Deaths Set a Record

GM Closing Plants, Laying off 15,000

California Fires Only Add to Acute Housing Crisis

Claim of Gene-Edited Babies Creates International Uproar

U.S. Life Expectancy Declines Again

Jesus's words to his disciples over two thousand years ago might as well have been for us: "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..."

No one would blame you if you turned off the news and quit paying attention. It's all too upsetting; it's all too much to take in, it all seems hopeless. No one would blame you if you stopped coming to church either, stopped praying, even stopped believing that these stories are, in some fundamental way, TRUE — stories of barren women having children in their old age; a young girl impregnated by a spirit; a baby born to an unmarried, teenage couple, and the child growing up to be a man, fully human and fully divine, who transforms the world, one person at a time, with the power of love. A man tortured and killed by a corrupt and power-hungry government and then raised from the dead by a God

more powerful still; stories of people who gathered together to proclaim a gospel of hope and peace and joy and love and mercy and transformation.

No one would blame you if you set the news aside, set the stories of our faith aside, and put your head down to get through each day. No one will blame you if you aren't feeling particularly hopeful.

For reasons no one understood, Emilie Gossiaux began to lose her hearing at a young age. In her teenage years, she had to wear a hearing aid. Nevertheless, Emilie was filled with a passion for visual art, and after graduating from high school in Florida, she moved to New York City to attend art school. She fell in love with one of her classmates, a young man named Alan. Life was good until one day, riding her bike to work, she was in a terrible accident, hit by a huge truck. Trauma doctors did everything they could to save Emilie's life, but she emerged in critical condition, having suffered a stroke, brain injury, and multiple fractures. Her prognosis was grim. Emilie's parents flew up from Louisiana and, with Alan, kept vigil at her bedside. Against all the odds, after six weeks, Emilie was still alive, although she showed few signs of mental functioning. Every time Alan or her parents tried to put in her hearing aids, she would kick and hit and flail, so she could not hear. And, worst of all, the doctors suspected that she had lost some

if not all of her vision. They had little reason to hope that she would recover, so her parents made plans to transport her to a long-term nursing facility in their hometown, where she would live out her life. Her situation was hopeless.

When we think things are hopeless, we plan accordingly, even when it comes to the practice of our faith. Sure, we show up to worship, but we do so without really believing what we proclaim in this time and place has any effect on what happens out in the "real world." On Sunday mornings we may proclaim that God's love prevails, that hope is real, that even in the midst of violence and division, God is with us. But on Monday (or even Sunday afternoon), we return to the rules of the "real world," where might makes right, and power corrupts, and the ones with the most toys win.

Today's words from Jesus remind us that all that is happening the chaos and tragedy and disruption and violence and division and nastiness it is nothing new. We are certainly not the first of God's followers, nor will we be the last, to despair over the state of our world.

Decades ago, in the midst of a horrific war and from a prison cell, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "There are people who think it frivolous and Christians who think it impious to hope for a better future on earth and to prepare for it. They believe in chaos, disorder, and catastrophe, perceiving it in what is happening now. They withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world, from the responsibility for ongoing life, for building anew,

for the coming generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; only then and no earlier will we readily lay down our work for a better future.”

How do we resist the temptation to withdraw in resignation or pious flight from the world? How do we lay down our work, the urgent needs of our daily lives for a better future? How do we live as Jesus commands, as though the day of judgment will dawn, if not tomorrow, then sometime soon? How do we see God in the best and worst of our lives and our world?

For Christians, one answer has always been: we worship. We gather to proclaim our belief, however, wavering it might be that, in the person of Jesus, drew near to us, and showed us the power of love and forgiveness. We worship to remember through the stories of our faith what that love looks like and how we are called to love and forgive as Jesus did.

Worship is a time we set apart to draw near to God, but our practice of setting worship apart creates a dangerous perception. For if we see worship as a time and place separate from the rest of our lives, we learn to leave our worries and our anxieties at the door of the sanctuary, thinking that in order to draw near to God, we have to set aside all those things we think oppose faith: fear, failure, doubt, anger, worry.

But, Jesus warns his disciples to pay attention to what's happening in the world around them, being alert and ready for God to show up. When these things begin to happen signs that the world is falling apart instead of putting your head down, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. According to Jesus, is not our responsibility to draw near to God that's not what worship is about. It is God who draws near to us not just in majestic spaces like this one, but every day, even, and especially, in times of trouble and tragedy and chaos and disruption. God does not wait to show up in the world or in our lives until everything is just right and we finally have it all figured out. The incarnation promises that God comes to us in the midst of circumstances that feel utterly hopeless. In fact, says Jesus, it is in such moments that God is closest at hand!

Even as Emilie's parents resigned themselves to her condition, Alan clung to hope that she could improve. One night, in a fit of desperation, he tried to

communicate with her by finger-spelling on her palm. He started by slowly and deliberately tracing each letter into her palm: I L.O.V.E. Y.O.U.

As soon as he finished, she spoke, her voice slurred but perfectly understandable. "You love me? Thank you." With growing excitement, he tried something else. "What is your name?" he spelled, and immediately, she responded, "Emilie." It was 4 a.m., but Alan called Emilie's mother and insisted that she come to the hospital immediately. When she arrived, Emilie's mother told Alan to ask her about the hearing aid. Alan finger-spelled "hearing aid" into her palm and Emilie nodded. Alan put the hearing aids in and said, "Emilie, can you hear me? It's me, Alan." And in that instant, that very moment she heard Alan's voice, everything came back to her. She knew who Alan was and she knew he loved her and that she loved him. Then, hearing her mother's voice, she said the words her mother had waited so many weeks to hear her say, "Mama. You're here." "Of course I'm here," her mother said, "I've been here all the time."<sup>1</sup>

What in your life feels hopeless? Maybe it's an illness, a broken relationship, a grief that persists. Maybe it's gun violence or climate change or politics or finances. No matter what you're hoping for, in Advent we remember that Jesus didn't come to take away all the brokenness of humanity, he was; instead, the manifestation of God drawing near to all the brokenness and hopelessness of the world.

In an interview, poet Christian Wiman was asked whether his attention to detail is simply a talent or a skill he has practiced. He responded, "Attention, like spiritual awareness, cannot be completely willed.

There's an element of givenness to it of grace which means that attentiveness has a passive quality as well as an active one. The world will come to you and God will come to you but only if you are open enough to receive it. I have trained myself to wait, which means that it is not at all unusual for me to go months without writing a poem. But I am listening during that time. I have learned how to continue listening."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Emilie's website [here](#) and hear her story on Radiolab, "[Finding Emilie](#)."

<sup>2</sup> Amy Frykholm, "Pain, Prayer, Poetry: An Interview with Christian Wiman," *The Christian Century*, April 18, 2011.

The hope we proclaim in Advent is that we can take worship our conviction that God is present, that God's love does matter beyond this sanctuary, beyond Sunday morning. True, biblical hope compels us to take our worship into our everyday lives, by reading the headlines with the confidence of God's children who believe that even in the worst of times, God draws near to us and that we are called to hold on to hope and to work for God's kingdom.

According to a story that Os Guinness tells, two hundred twenty years ago the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May, and the delegates were doing their work by natural light. But then something unexpected happened. Right in the middle of the debate, the day turned to night. Clouds obliterated the sun, and everything turned to darkness. Some legislators thought it was the Second Coming. A clamor arose. People wanted to adjourn. People wanted to pray. People wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord. But the speaker of the House had a different idea. "We are all upset by the darkness," he said, "and some of us are afraid. But the Day of the Lord is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I, therefore, ask that candles be brought. And candles were brought. And the debate continued."<sup>3</sup>

Hope is our birthright. It is our birthright as God's children. Not just today, but every day of every week of every year. True worship is the work of taking the hope we find here out into the world, where we proclaim it, into every dismal situation, telling the good news that, not just here but everywhere, God draws near.

Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Hoezee, commentary on Luke 21:25-36 on the Center for Excellence in Preaching website: [http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-1c-2/?type=lectionary\\_epistle](http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/advent-1c-2/?type=lectionary_epistle)