

*Hope: Odd and Awed*

Shepherd's Grace Church

December 1, 2013

<sup>36</sup>“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour! (Matt. 24: 36-44)(Also Read Isaiah 2: 1-5)

Donnie Huffman sings a song “Christmas is Coming” that reminds us of an ever present reality. Black Friday has come and gone. Thanksgiving is a distant memory. The reality is, CHRISTMAS IS COMING! Doesn't it seem odd that only three days ago we were celebrating a season of late fall and enjoying the fruits of harvest? I can still feel the effects of that celebration! There were 29 people at Rochelle's family Thanksgiving celebration. My daughters got to come. Sons in law were there also but that's just a throw in isn't it? I mean, if the daughters come, the others of necessity seem to show up! I'm sure it's important to the daughters but to me...well, maybe not as much. Anyway, the daughters were there. Everyone was there! We had food enough round the table to feed a small country and I ate more than my share! It was a wonderful celebration!

On Friday, we traveled to Overland Park for a celebration with my sister and all of my side of the family. There were 16 there and again there was enough food for us, the neighbors and probably all the neighbor's family and friends. Once again, I ate more than my share! We celebrated, we laughed, we talked and we remembered. Thanksgiving is all about the memories for me. It is a time of recollection, a time to celebrate family; family present and family past. It is only a day and it comes and it goes and now, “Christmas is Coming!” How odd! How odd indeed that we rush through one holiday and so immediately into another!

This Advent season we are going to try not to do that! We are going to try to journey through the lessons God has for us to learn. We are going to try to be patient and examine both the odd and the awesome of the season. This season, God is inviting us to look carefully, to expect the unexpected and to anticipate the possibility that God will bring us to our knees once again at exactly the right moment; not a moment too soon and not a moment too late, but at exactly the right moment! To that end, I invite you to tour the sanctuary this morning. Look around and recognize that there are not many changes. We have the Advent candles, we have our tree hung with Chrismons; reminders of the significance of the season, pointing in a direction, inviting us to step onto the path toward Christmas and at the same time encouraging us to linger and look at all that is available to us. On this first Sunday of

Advent, it is as if God is saying to us, do not rush. Learn about what I am about to do for I am about to do a new thing and I am about to do it all over again and I am about to do it for you!

This Advent season we will examine carefully the words of the season; not the words Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays but the words that lead us to both, the words hope, peace, love, and joy. These four words invite us to see the odd and to be awed at the same time. They invite us to experience the unusual sense of humor God has while inviting us to comprehend to a greater degree the awesome presence of the Creator of the Universe! We will look at each of these words one at a time, but we will come to recognize that each is inseparable from the others. We will recognize that these four words are a metaphor for the journey God is inviting us to and that the Word God has given through scripture will keep us on the path. The path may not always seem straight to us, but it is not our path. It is Gods! In God's own way, God will lead us to the place God wants us to be and God will guide us so we arrive at exactly the right time and in exactly the right place!

The passage from Isaiah for this morning illustrates God's intent precisely. This first Sunday of Advent we study the word hope. Hope puts us on the path toward God. Hope puts us on the path toward Christmas! Hope starts our journey. The Apostle Paul says in the book of Romans Chapter 5 that hope comes from suffering which produces endurance which produces character and it is that character, that product of all we have become and of all we might become which gives us hope. Hope then comes as a gift from God, a gift given in the fullness of life, not just in the easy times but in the difficult times as well that recognizes all we are and all we can be. Hope is our imagination! Hope is the process of our dreams becoming reality! Hope is our anticipation that in the world now and in the world yet to come there is something greater than that which we have encountered! Hope is at the beginning of our journey through Advent because hope is at the very beginning of our next conscious action. None of us takes our next step expecting it to produce poor results. Each of us takes our next step desiring it to produce something more than what we have. We imagine a possibility and we step into that possibility. Hope is that step.

Isn't it odd that we hear this passage and do not perceive in it hope? The prophet intends it to be a passage of hope. The mountain of the Lord will become the highest of mountains. God's place shall be exalted! These are words of hope. They establish in our mind the message that God shall take the supreme place in our world and that we can look to God alone as guide to our future happiness! What's more, the prophet guides us to imagine a new reality. In God's presence we, the people of the world will willingly beat our swords into plowshares. We will transform our weapons of wrath and destruction into instruments of production and proliferation! We will care for one another instead of waging war against one another! We will beat our spears into pruning hooks! We will dismantle our massive defense systems and design new and more productive methods of producing food and clothing.

The reason this passage sounds odd to us this morning is because we have not perceived it in light of God's concern for us. In chapter 1 of Isaiah, the Lord indicts people of privilege, people of abundance for failing to care for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned. For this reason the Lord intends to bring these people to justice! God's justice however, is odd. God's justice does not desire punishment but obedience! God's justice invites hope instead of despair! God's justice invites the world to be

transformed. In Isaiah 43: 19 God says, "I am about to do a new thing! There will be water in the wilderness, flowers in the desert!" God's justice invites forgiveness and encourages us to imagine an altogether different outcome for our world. How awed might we be if we perceive God's desire for us in these terms! How odd that we do not!

At this point, you are probably thinking, "what does all this have to do with Christmas?" Where is the baby Jesus in this justice? Where are the shepherd's and the stable and the wise men? When do we get to the good stuff? At this point I want to suggest to you that hope is the "good stuff!" Hope is the essence of change in our world and hope imagines that change. If we move directly to the first coming of Jesus we miss the opportunity to hope for the second! We know "Christmas is Coming!" What God wants us to long for is the reality of that Christmas. What God invites us into is a time of transformation; of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks! Next week we will talk about peace but this week we begin to plant the seed of imagination that invites us to consider the possibility that we might never do war any more!

That possibility is the point at which our Hebrew Bible lesson and the words of Matthew intersect this morning. It is odd that immediately upon hearing the words of Matthew 24 this morning our curiosity is peaked. We as Christians long for the second coming. We seldom connect it with the first coming but we all have an intense interest in when it will happen. The first coming happened in the still of the night. It happened after four hundred years of silence. It happened in a little town in the middle of nowhere to an insignificant couple too poor to be recognized as the most logical descendants of King David. It happened in such a way that no one saw it coming and no one experienced any change...that is, until after a time of betrayal, trial, execution, death and then resurrection!

Just as in the days of Noah, no one saw the flood coming, so also no one sees the coming of the son of man! No one perceives the possibility of the fulfillment of God's promise! No one waits for the fullness of time! We think to ourselves that if a virgin birth were to take place in a little town in Israel we would sit up and take notice, but would we? In Chapter 24, leading up to the passage we study this morning, Jesus tells his disciples, those closest to Him that there will be signs. There will be flood and famine, there will be earthquake and hailstorm. He says there will be many who will pretend to be "the one" so they might receive glory and adulation! He tells those who have lived with Him, who have studied Him that there will be signs!

Today we want to prepare for the coming of the baby in the manger but God invites us into a greater reality! The coming of the baby was a sign. "For unto you, (all people, all of you) on this day in the city of David a child is born who is the Messiah, the Lord, and this shall be a sign to you!" (Luke 2: 8ff) It was given for those who were available and paying attention. Are we paying attention? Are we preparing for the time when God will draw near? Are we making a journey toward our faith or are we making a journey in the wilderness, wandering aimlessly without really looking? Is our hope today odd or is it awesome?

Just prior to our passage for today, the disciples were looking at the temple. They were in awe of the large stones used to create the structure. I have walked at the base of this same temple where Jesus

and his disciples walked and talked. Some of the stones are 100 feet in length, more than 8 feet in height and 5 feet in width. They weigh hundreds of tons! They were moved from a quarry miles from the site of the temple and were placed so precisely that even today something as thin as an ordinary sheet of notebook paper cannot be inserted between most of them. The architecture and design are among the wonders of the ancient world! The architect and engineer of their construction is none other than Herod, the ruler of Jerusalem just prior to the birth of Jesus.

The disciples marveled at the massive structure and the construction which supported it. As good Jews, they believed the temple would stand forever. They could not imagine an enemy or an army that could destroy it. Further, they could not imagine a person in the world who would desire to destroy a thing of such beauty and testament to human ability. Matthew's Jesus however, envisions just such an occurrence. His words serve to question just where we place our hope. Isn't it odd that people, even the disciples who lived and worked with Jesus on a daily basis find comfort in human creation. Isn't it odd that humans believe we are in control of our world and our destiny and that no one or thing can prevent us from being able to make for ourselves a better world!

Our evangelist Matthew puts these words in Jesus' mouth this morning to remind us just how fragile our human imaginations can be. Matthew writes his message to a group of people living probably far from Jerusalem. They live far away because many of them fled a mass destruction there. Matthew writes probably around 75 A. D. (Anno Domini; In the year of our Lord or C.E.; common era), that is about 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. As his audience hears the words they are reminded that only a few weeks after he delivers these words to His disciples he is crucified. Matthew wants to make the point to his congregation that the rock of faith upon which the disciples built their hope was quickly and brutally destroyed; his human self desecrated and despised as worth nothing!

More profoundly they are reminded of their own situation; they are reminded that just a few years prior to the message they hear they, themselves were living in Jerusalem, living perhaps in comfort and with confidence in the temple as a reminder of God's constant protection of them. Then, in just a very short time the Roman Empire, in a display of strength dashed their hopes and destroyed their ability to imagine a future as soldiers destroyed the temple. That magnificent structure which Jesus' disciples could not imagine being destroyed lay in ruins because of political and personal differences which could not be reconciled! Matthew's people heard the message we hear today as a group of refugees cut off from the temple, cut off from security, cut off from possibility by a ruthless and violent attack upon their very system of beliefs.

Matthew's congregation believed that the temple and temple sacrifice assured them a relationship with their God of promise. They believed that if they were faithful to the law given them by Moses, that if they followed the customs and traditions of the priests and the hierarchy of their faith that God would protect them from all evil and from destruction. In fact, they believed that by their faithful practice of religion God would prosper them! Is it odd or awesome that the passage we read today reminds them of just how fragile these practices are?

Is it odd or awesome to us as we sit here this morning to realize the fragility and futility of their situation. We sit comfortably in our chairs thinking that Matthew's message could never be a message to us. We live in a land where we hold democracy as our standard. We are not guided by the rule of individuals who would oppress us or betray us. We have governmental protections against such events and yet...and yet those who came to found our nation came from places of oppression to establish for themselves and for those who would follow them a place where all are welcome, where all are able to provide for themselves and for their families, where all are equal. The entrance to our port of immigration proudly boasts our belief; "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free!"

We sit today unable to imagine our hopes for increased wealth and prosperity for us and our children being denied us while just a few blocks from where we gather to worship in hope there are those who gather to worship in despair! There are, in our own community people who are persecuted for their desire to come to this country and provide for themselves and their families an opportunity to prosper. There are those who will get up tomorrow and go to work at a job where they will work hard to earn a living for their family and on that job they will be taunted as those who are different. The color of their skin is different, their accent (perhaps even their language) is different. Their food is different. They long for acceptance and for an opportunity to recognize the full promise of Christmas!

We sit today unable to imagine our hopes for relationships of love being denied while in our community today there are those who have no hope for relationship. They are abused and abandoned by their parents or other relatives or people in authority whom they should have been able to trust above all others. We want to believe like Jesus' disciples that nothing can tear away the fabric of our relationships because they are strong enough to endure forever and yet there are those living next door to us who know a very different reality! Isn't it odd that we struggle so to see the admonition Jesus gives us this morning?

"No one knows the day or the hour!" No one knows the time when God's judgment will come upon us. We want to live as those who are above such things as evil and destruction and yet we see it all around us. The disciples saw it too! They knew of the evil of the Roman Soldiers. They had heard of the stories of King Herod sending men to Bethlehem to kill all the children under 2 years old because it was feared one of them was the messiah, the king (Matt. 1). They knew what it was to live in a society where those who were pledged to protect instead pillaged and plundered those who had no voice! They knew what it was to be criticized for acting differently in the midst of those who thought theirs was the only way to act. They themselves had been accused of violating the laws of Moses by working for their food on the Sabbath or participating in healings at inappropriate times. While they were in the midst of their journey with Jesus the disciples wanted to believe they were above these things. Matthew's point to his congregation today, his point to our congregation today is that we are not above these things! We have an obligation to be prepared, to see what is going on, to serve others as if our very lives depended on it for indeed they do!

We do not make our journey to the stable and the manger and the images of Mary and Joseph and the baby on the first Sunday of Advent because we are not yet ready to make our journey there. Instead we

must learn to hope. We must learn to imagine a different world. That is what the coming of Jesus means. That is what Christmas means. If hope is our imagination then we must learn to hope for something beyond our own prosperity. We must learn to hope for the prosperity of the world and for all of God's creation. We must look to restore right relations with people who are different from us for they too will be part of the Kingdom of God! We must learn to listen to those who have no voice in our society for they are the ones who will speak God's love to us! We must learn to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks! We must learn to put aside our objectives of gaining more for ourselves and recognize that our greatest prosperity will come when all are prosperous! We must learn just how fragile our human constructions are and how easily they can be destroyed!

We can continue to marry and give in marriage. We can continue to feast in our own world of ignorance and bliss, but the day of the Lord is coming. In that day two will be working and one will be taken, the other left. In that day, we will be going about our business and suddenly we will be swept away by the power of God's presence! Matthew invites us today to be prepared!

He wants us to know the magnificence of the stones upon which the temple was built but he also wants to remind us that the Rock upon which our faith is built is even more magnificent. While his congregation was reminded of the fragility of the temple and its ultimate destruction they were reminded that it was not rebuilt.

Matthew also wants to remind us that while the congregation was reminded of the destruction of Jesus, the one upon whom the disciples had built their faith foundation, they were also reminded He was raised up! He was restored, He was resurrected to a new life, a life beyond anything they could have ever imagined. They were reminded that his fate is our hope! He came that he might save his people from their sins! (Matt. 1: 18) Our hope today is awesome because it is in Him! Our hope is awesome and not odd today because we know that it is this one we seek on our journey toward Christmas!

As we begin our advent journey we begin in hope, an imagination that there is something beyond the refugee world we live in that will bear fruit even into eternity. We prepare ourselves today for that possibility and we begin! We begin not with a baby in a manger but with a promise from God that He will draw near, that He will sweep us up to something more incredible than we can ever possibly imagine. We begin with a God who is our hope! Let us journey together in Him! Amen!