

First Congregational Church of Montague Trinitarian
Rev. Barbara Turner Delisle
November 29, 2015
First Sunday of Advent Hope
Psalm 25, Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Hope for the Journey

Let us pray: May the meditation of our hearts and the words of my mouth be acceptable in your sight our Lord and Redeemer. Amen

Here we are again... at the beginning of the church year. It always takes me by surprise... even as many years as I have been doing this... this is our New Years Day... Happy New Year everyone!

I don't think of it until I get into my preparations for this sermon each year but it is very appropriate that it is not the same as the secular New Year on January 1st. This first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the New Year in the life of the church but it also marks the beginning of life itself for Christians with the birth of the baby Jesus, the incarnation of God, the streaming of the Christ light into the world.

And it begins with apocalyptic language... the upheaval of all things as in the opening verses of the gospel from Luke: 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.”

Just last week we were talking about the intertwining of life and death, death and life... It is a cycle that we are inextricably a part of ... we cannot have new life without the death of something first... without the removal of something that makes space for that new thing. So it is appropriate that our year begins with a reminder of the apocalypse, the total destruction of life as we know it.

I know many people look around at what is happening in the world and think... ah... I know what is coming... this must be the time we have been waiting for ... the time when Jesus comes down and finally saves us from this interminable cycle of death and life and death and life. When he comes to save us from ourselves... our selfish, little selves who cannot get out of our own way despite our grandest and most sincere desire to put others first. God save us we chant... God save me from myself that I may put you first through service to others. We chant just before we fall away again!

We look forward to the return of Jesus with both joy and foreboding. Who wants to go through all the pain of living in the world if there is not relief on the horizon? But, who wants to go through the pain to get there... to get to the new world? Who wants the apocalypse... warring nations, shooting stars, red hurricane skies, earthquakes... death and destruction for everyone... who would wish for that?! But, it is clear that no new life comes before something of the old is relinquished. Luke links the two together. After describing the apocalypse, he assures us then is when we will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

And when that takes place we know our salvation, our saving grace is imminent. ...²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Sadly it is often only the experience of some great tragedy, loss or grief, "the end of something of great value or meaning that shocks a man or woman off the trajectory of normal life into another, more sacred orbit." Sadly we find it so difficult to face reality and slip loose of the grip that temptation has on us to set aside the holy in favor of the profane. R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) speaks of it in this poem titled The Bright Field:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

How many times do we pass by the very opportunity that can bring us to exactly what we are crying out for... a deep experience of God. Thomas speaks of the field being illuminated by the sun... that is a simple thing to be encouraged to stop and witness. That one is easy. But, so often the opportunities for deep communion with the divine do not come wrapped in a pretty package with a tag that says... here... this is God... this is your opportunity to sit with God.

Too often the package appears damaged and crushed, too ugly to be recognized as something of value. A gentle woman, dirty clothes, hair unkempt looking for a handout... what would a conversation with her yield? How might my heart break open in a moment with her? Could I survive that?

Thing is, we don't want to survive if that means to stay the same. We want to be changed. That is what we are longing for... what happens in a close encounter with the divine... When a heart breaks open, it allows for the light of Christ to spill out and fill the rest of the body. Like helium filling a balloon, we rise in response.

In the splitting open there is pain... great soul pain... but, always, Christ is there to help, to comfort, ...to guide. Christ is always waiting, always present. When we take the time to look, we see. It's just that we often need some dramatic prompting to cause us to open our eyes. It can be like that when we are in a deep sleep. Advent is about waking up. We've had some losses this past year, some pains to work through, in our own lives and in the life of our church, our community, our world. We often want to sleep in order to stop or dull the pain. But, we know to do so just results in more of the same. In this time of Advent we are called to awaken to a new way of being in the world. We are called to engage with the loss rather than shy away, for that is where we find God most active. This is where the journey of hope begins... This is where "the soul begins the great adventure of growing in holiness, Christ-consciousness, universal compassion." (Susannah Guthrie)

Evelyn Underhill, acknowledges what a difficult situation this is for us. She tells us in her book *Mysticism*, "The awakened subject is not merely to perceive transcendent life, but to participate therein; and for this, a drastic and costly life-changing is required." (Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941 *Mysticism* p.195)

We are not in this life just to sit and watch like it is some kind of movie. No, we are to play a part in it which will require “a drastic and costly life change.... Oh yah... I’m up for that! How about you?”

Such a comment is enough to cause one to run the other way. And yet, this is exactly why we are all here... to be bolstered in our attempts to connect with the divine. This is what we are about as practicing Christians. Trusting in God’s providential care of us... God’s ability to get us through the scary and difficult places of life so we can experience the wild joy, or the quiet peace, that comes from partnering with God. The rewards of stepping forward, even in fear, far outweigh the risk. Barriers drop away and new found life pours in.

The journey of hope leads you to discover the God in every living thing... leads you to the knowledge that you are never alone... leads you to experience the truth in the greeting, Namasté... “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you... Nothing can separate us once we surrender to the All in All. Or as Mary Luti says in the advent devotional for today, “...what we wait for in Advent is not someone to fix us but someone to reveal us to ourselves.”

And so, I say to you in all hope, Namasté, (The God in me bows to the God in you!)

Amen and Amen

Quotes from Edge of Enclosure:

“My end is my beginning.” So often it is tragedy, loss, grief, the end of something of great value or meaning that shocks a man or woman off the trajectory of normal life into another, more sacred orbit. The church year begins with the shock and disorientation of apocalypse; acknowledging the necessity of a humbling toppling down into living a transcendent life. “It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush” toward “the eternity that awaits you.” (See the R. S. Thomas poem below). Then, parallel to and integrated with the struggles of daily life, the soul begins the great adventure of growing in holiness, Christ-consciousness, universal compassion.” Susannah Guthrie, Edge of enclosure

Threshold: The esoteric significance of the threshold relates to its position in the passage from the external (profane) to the internal (sacred) state.... To stand at the threshold is to indicate one’s readiness to obey the rules by which the place is governed. ...To stand at the threshold is also to place oneself under the protection of the master of the house, be he God, grandee or peasant. Crossing the threshold requires a degree of bodily purgation and purity of mind and

soul, symbolized, for example, by the removal of one's shoes before entering a mosque or a Japanese house. The threshold is the borderline of the holy and participation in the transcendence of the centre.

-Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols, trans. John Buchanan-Brown, 1969

**We must be still and still moving
into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my
beginning.**

-T.S.Eliot 1888-1965 from "East Coker" Four Quartets

The Bright Field

**I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.**

-R. S. Thomas 1913-2000

The awakened subject is not merely to perceive transcendent life, but to participate therein; and for this, a drastic and costly life-changing is required."

-Evelyn Underhill, 1875-1941 Mysticism p.195

On the first Sunday of Advent the church says, Look! Keep awake! Face your profoundest fear, and then, my Love, I have something wonderful to show you! Susannah Guthrie