

Isaiah 64:1-9
Mark 13:24-37
Sermon Title: Trepidation and Hope

First Sunday in Advent, December 3, 2017
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Every first Sunday of Advent, the lectionary gives us Bible passages that are trepidation laced with hope or hope laced with trepidation, depending on what you look at. Admittedly, these passages seem very out of step with the world around us as everyone seems to be gearing up for Christmas. When did you notice that the muzak played in the background at stores and restaurants shifted from soft pop and rock to various kinds of Christmas music? I noticed it immediately after Thanksgiving. The world would have us believe that this is the time to set aside all concern and melancholy feelings and to start getting our ho-ho-ho on and our jingle jolly going.

By putting these passages at the beginning of Advent, the lectionary organizers are basically saying, "Not so fast. Slow down with the ho-ho-ho and jingle jolly stuff." Why? Because in order to truly be ready to receive Christ again and celebrate his birth, we need to get our houses in order first – and by houses in order, they don't mean cleaning, shopping and putting up a tree. They mean stop and take inventory of your heart, your mind, your soul and your practices in your daily living. Yes, your beliefs may be okay, and your belonging to a faith community in some way may be okay, but what about sin – have you taken a fearless inventory lately, confessed and made amends? Are you watching for the in-breaking of Christ and the Holy Spirit so that you can get involved with what they are doing or are you too busy with your own stuff? Are you really practicing your faith by working for justice for all, helping the poor and widowed, and proclaiming the good news or have you gotten sloppy about that?

There's an old joke out there about the second coming of Jesus. Someone says, "Hey everyone, Jesus is coming! Look busy!" Well, busy with what?

This past week, Mike and I spent a couple of vacation days at Colonial Williamsburg. It'd been over twenty years since we had been there. A lot has changed. More structures are restored or rebuilt, making it so that there seems to be more for the public to see. There were more tours of homes and other historical sites than I remember, and there was a deeper look at the history of the time, with a little more honesty about the good and the not so good. So for example, we took a tour of the Bruton Parish Church. In 1774 it was Anglican – Church of England. The men who ran the church were also the leaders elsewhere. The preacher was the president of the College of William and Mary. The vestry was made up of men who were also elected members of the Virginia senate and house of burgess. At the time, what was most important was that you were a member and that you attended worship each Sunday. In fact, if you missed a Sunday for no good reason, you were fined. Many of these men were the same men who were patriots. Their aim was simply to preserve the rights of Englishmen, rights that they saw were being taken away as Britain tried to tighten control over the colonies. Yet, the people they were

fighting for were only about 7 to 9 % of the population – that is free white men, over the age of 21, who owned a certain amount of property (at least 25 acres or possessions, including slaves, of a certain value). In other words, they were fighting for rights for the gentry, the elite, the wealthy. When they cried justice for all, in truth they left out many white men who owned less or who were craftsmen. They left out women, children, native peoples, blacks the vast majority of whom were enslaved and people of mixed race. Together all those who were left out of the cry for freedom and rights were the majority of the population. I'm sure you can see the double standards in their cry for justice for all. It made me wonder how much different are we today? How much does justice still mean just us? In whose favor are the scales of justice tipped today? And what can we do, individually and collectively to tip the scales back toward equal for all?

The #MeToo campaign recently followed by the many women who have had the guts to come forward and talk about sexual harassment in the work place reveals that there's still some work of justice that needs to be done. Everyone including women, has the right to work in a safe and fair work environment. The Black Lives Matter movement reminds us that Jim Crow is not a thing of the past. There's still equality and freedom to be achieved. The rights of immigrants are now being questioned. I could keep going. The point is the house that needs to be put in order is not just inside our individual hearts, minds and souls. It is also a matter of our culture and society.

You see, we worship a God who cares enough for us to hold us accountable. The prophet Isaiah talks to God on behalf of the people saying, "You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against your ways, you were angry." (Isaiah 64:1-9) Isaiah describes the consequences of such sin and disregard for the ways and expectations of God saying, the result is that "you, God, have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins." (Isaiah 64:7b) Isaiah also reminds us that we aren't left without options, for our God is a God who "acts on behalf of those who wait for him," and who "remember" God's ways (Isaiah 64: 4, 5) One of the ways of God that we remember is that God's mercy is limitless; God freely forgives those who confess and repent and seek to reorient their lives. So indeed, this call to take a fearless and honest inventory on how we've lived up to God's expectations can fill us with anxiety, trepidation, and dread. It would be a whole lot easier – and more fun – to skip it and get on with the ho-ho-ho and jingle jolly stuff. But this is an opportunity for a fresh start – as we get out the advent wreath and all the rest of the Christmas decorations, we are invited to do some self-reflection and give up and put away all those things that hinder our relationship with God and with one another, individually and collectively. Why? It is so that we come to the celebration of the birth of Christ refreshed and renewed. Doesn't that sound nice?

But as I said at the beginning these passages are dread laced with hope and hope laced with dread, depending on what you look at. So let's talk about the hope that is found there. Jesus goes on to remind us that it's not just a matter of the ways

of God and expectations as outlined in the commandments and more, but it's also that we are stewards and servants, managing everything that we have and everything that we are on behalf of God, the master and owner. Isn't it wonderful that God thinks that much of us to put us in charge? And at some point, we don't know when, but at some point, God will appear and when that happens, we'd better not be caught napping (Mark 14:36). We'd better be ready to give an account of what we've been doing on behalf of God.

Notice, that there is no call to flee the day-to-day realities, obligations and responsibilities of life. There is only the promise that "he (the Son of Man) is near." (Mark 13:29) We are servants "in charge, each with an assigned task," (Mark 13:34) and we are to keep at those assigned tasks. One of the things that we have learned by practicing our faith is that Jesus is Immanuel – God with us – and we find him among us when we are doing what he has called us to do. These passages give us hope because by keeping at the tasks that God has called us to do, we remember first, that God comes to us as we are – sure, there's room for improvement – but God comes to us as we are doing the best we can to live according to God's ways and as servants to Jesus the master. Second: if we are looking for Jesus to be born anew among us, then the best way to find him is to go about his business of loving others, serving the needs of others, blessing others, and sharing good news with others in word and deed.

Third, as Isaiah mentions, in the same way that the potter isn't going to forget the clay, (Because after all, if you are going to be a potter, you've gotta have clay), God isn't going to forget us and God isn't done fashioning us as his people. "We are all the work of [God's] hand." (Isaiah 64:8) Rather than seeing problems all around us and other people who aren't very perfect, as servants and as clay in the hands of God the potter, I believe that these passages call us to see the people and situation around us as gifts of God that we are called to love and care for, in the same way that ultimately God loves and cares for them and us.

The problem is in the next four weeks, there will be plenty of distractions, plenty of pushes and pulls on our time and energy, and plenty of temptations to ditch the work of being servants in Christ's kingdom. I can imagine how long your to-do list is, because I know how long mine is! But at the same time, there will be plenty of opportunities to serve and if we make time, to reflect and repent, we can see God at work with eyes unclouded by the past. Perhaps the biggest gift we can give to one another this Advent is the invitation to slow down so that we can reflect on how God the potter might be shaping us as well as watch carefully for how Christ is already living, moving and working among us. If we stop and look, we might actually see Christ in the face of a tired mother gently and lovingly wrangling her children through a store. We might hear the voices of the prophets in all the voices that shout out on behalf of the poor and those for whom the scales of justice seem unfairly tipped against. Or we might witness Christ in a simple, random act of kindness. We might hear the love of God in the musicians playing and singing to the glory of God. Or we might taste a bit of heaven in an impromptu potluck supper

with friends. If we steward our time of Advent well, I believe that we will end up with a lot less trepidation and a lot more hope. And we will have seen Christ again and anew.

I leave you with a story, of sorts. It is true. When I got back from vacation, I opened a letter from Bill Thompson. Bill is a former member of our congregation. He and his wife, Jane, live in Florida and they've been in Florida for over 25 years now. With his permission, I would like to read his letter to you.

"Dear Betsey. I wanted to share something with you that happened just this weekend. It was on Saturday, and I was pondering words when "hope" came to me and the more I thought, what I came up with is HOPE because "He Opens People's Eyes." I thought no more about it until our pastor included "hope" in his sermon the next day, and as we walked together I recounted what had transpired the day before. He whipped out his I-pone and repeated what I had spoken and he thanked me profusely. I guess I came up with something nice. What do you think? Bill"

I think he did come up with something nice – and profound. Our hope is that God opens people's eyes – our eyes included – to see his glory, his miracles, and yes, even his son, who is Immanuel, God with us even today. So let's slow down, breath, reflect, and watch, so that we are available to God for him to open our eyes, and when we see, let's be sure to point it out to others.