

SERMON for Nov. 28, 2021**by Jim Hill, at Grace Lutheran Church****Advent 1 Lectionary Year of Luke (C)****TEXTS: Jeremiah 33:14-16 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13****Luke 21:25-36****TITLE: "Hope, not Despair"**

It was gut-wrenching to see and read about the damage to farms in the Abbotsford area after the recent heavy rain and flooding -- farms decimated and livelihoods lost.

Yet there were amazing stories of survival. Two brothers who ran a dairy farm had 180 cows up to their necks in water for two days, and they had to go in by boat and feed them hay. The newspaper I was reading said that the cows are fine now, and back on line, being milked.

In the same newspaper, I read a story about damage to the entire town of Princeton, where people's gas and electricity were gone and there was no water supply at all for some people. In some homes, there was water coming out of the taps, but it was so contaminated that it was undrinkable. The subheading at the top of that Princeton story said that this flooding was (quote) "a test of endurance and hope".

A test of endurance and hope. That's what many of our troubles are. The difficulty is maintaining your hope, so you can endure. How blessed you and I are, that we believe in a God of limitless power and limitless love, who has been our help in the past, and will be our help in the future. That's what we sang a few moments ago: "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.

Nowadays many churches, including Grace Lutheran, are undergoing a test of endurance and hope. I praise God for your presence here today, for it's a sign not only of your faith in God, and your desire to give thanks, but also a sign that you still have hope for the future of Grace Lutheran Church. This morning, here the front, we lit our first Advent candle, the candle of hope. As the saying goes, "It's better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness."

I'm amazed that there's so much darkness and despair in rich countries today. Where does that come from? Most of us are not lacking material things, or lacking of food or clothing or shelter or basic health care!

It seems to me that, for people who are suffering from depression or despair, the causes are not so much physical or genetic, but psychological and spiritual, and especially from a lack of hope for the future. Despite our wealth and comforts, there's so much pessimism and negativity, maybe having its roots in a bad home-life, or from emotional and psychological hurts in childhood or teen-age. Or perhaps it's partly because some people have been catered to all their life, and have always gotten what they wanted, and now they're not, and that can be traumatic for "spoiled" people.

Another factor in our negativity and depression, I think, is that we've taken modern societal progress for granted. We've seen so much progress and improvement in our quality of life in the last century that a lot of us are shocked that in this 21st century we seem to be regressing. It seems that addiction problems and mental health problems are increasing, and that lately there are more broken families, more street people, and more people who are losing their self-control and becoming violent.

Another factor, I think, is that more and more people have been leaving the church and looking for fellowship and community elsewhere, where they can feel they belong. But that kind of "communion" is rare.

And then, of course, there's the increasing worry about the future of our planet. As one of the protest signs says: "There ain't no Planet B."

So what can we do to overcome negativity and despair and maintain our hope?

Pretending to be optimistic and happy only makes things worse. I've been in some fundamentalist churches where most everyone seemed to have this constant, fakey smile on their face. They seemed to be pretending to be happy but I could see that their demeanor and their eyes were sad. I suppose if they're wearing masks now, that's an improvement!

Faking faith and hope when you don't have them is a no-go. It's simply stupid, sometimes so stupid that it's funny.

Have you ever seen the old Monty Python movie, "Life of Brian"? At the end, "Brian" (Jesus) and his friends are crucified and are hanging on crosses, looking lost and dazed. . . all except Brian, who says in a cockney accent: "Cheer up, lads. When you're chewing on life's gristle, don't grumble. Give a whistle." Then he starts whistling and singing a happy song: "Always Look on

the Bright Side of Life.” (sing with whistle following and head bobbing side to side)

Unbelievably, that satirical song turned into hit, performed in a serious way by many groups around the world! . . .as if it were easy to turn sorrow into joy, depression into elation, despair into hope. It is not easy, yet it is possible.

The main message of the New Testament is that we can have hope, and joy in our hope, because God in the person of Christ was born into this crazy and troubled world on that first Christmas, and this God in Christ grew up among us, lived our life, suffered our losses, died our death, and then rose again to life eternal -- the road that we, who follow him, will also walk.

John Bunyan, a populist British preacher, published a book in 1678 called, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” which, like the Bible, has been so popular it has never gone out of print. Pilgrim’s Progress is an allegory of the Christian life as Bunyan saw it. Temptations are personified as characters whom Christian (the protagonist) meets along the road of life. The worst disaster that this character, Christian, experiences is to fall off the path into a boggy swamp called the “Slough of Despond”. But eventually he is pulled out of the mire by a character named “Help”. This “Christian” always has characters who accompany him, but when he eventually reaches the “Celestial City”, Christian must enter alone (as we all must, in the end). The point of the novel is that it’s not an easy road, but it’s doable.

The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews used the metaphor of life as running a race. In Hebrews 12 verses 1-3 we read, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us . . . lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured. . . so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.” Remember that: Do not lose heart. Your hope does have a solid basis.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke (chapter 21) sounds like a real “downer”. If these predictions about the future are true, it’s enough to make anyone lose heart. The first two verses say (quote): "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.” However, in the next few verses we hear good news: “. . . Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Then [Jesus] tells them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. . .”, the implication being: you and I don't have to fear.

The constant refrain of the whole Bible is that people keep hurting themselves and getting themselves into trouble, with seemingly no way out. But God always provides a way.

Our lives are like a constantly moving see-saw. In terms of the themes of the Advent wreath (hope, peace and joy): when our despair goes up, our hope goes down. And when our hope goes up our despair goes down. Likewise when our turmoil goes up, our peace diminishes; it goes down. then when we regain our sense of peace, our turmoil recedes; it goes down. When our sorrow goes up, our joy goes down; when our joy returns, our sorrow goes down. And so on.

Today's Scripture contains a lot of warnings about future troubles, but a message of hope still comes through. God's promise is, that there is a time coming when our current troubles will be past. I can't stress strongly enough that this is how God typically works. God keeps upending our expectations, making the last first and the first last, exalting the humble and humbling the exalted. God brings strength out of weakness and gain out of loss, joy out of sorrow and wisdom out of failure. God brings strength out of suffering and resurrection out of death.

Let us never for a moment forget that God will triumph in the end. Don't give up hope. Our Lord Jesus Christ died and seemed to have lost the battle. But in fact, he won the war. So will we.

Amen.