

Highland Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Advent – November 27, 2022
“The Promise of Hope”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 24:36-44

Before I moved to Kentucky, I lived in Florida City, Florida. Florida City is south of Miami, in an area that is mostly Everglades, fruit farms, and tomato fields. This area, along with many others, was completely leveled by hurricane Andrew in 1992. It remains a target for many hurricanes each year since it's on the very edge of the peninsula and only partially protected by islands to the south, but so far, nothing has done damage like Andrew. Nevertheless, when they are in the path of a hurricane, people take it seriously. Hurricanes are interesting beasts, because unlike tornados or flash floods, you have days to prepare for this disaster. You spend time boarding up windows, covering large electronics in plastic, making sure you have plenty of food and fresh water, making sure you have gas for your generators. I lived there for five years and every hurricane season we went through this routine at least three times. Sometimes seven or eight. Even as my coworkers and I became a well-oiled machine in hurricane preparations at work and home, it was still exhausting. And, frankly, it was annoying because almost every time, the hurricane changed course or became a tropical storm and it felt like you spent days preparing for nothing. But thank goodness that was the reality of the time I lived there. Because others have not been so lucky. And preparations are what count in hurricanes; complacency is a dangerous game to play when you are playing against climate change.

It's interesting to start off Advent talking about preparations and the second coming of Christ. But, beginning with preparing for the second coming reminds us that the work of the first advent of Jesus is not complete. The risen Jesus instructs and empowers the church to continue its witness until the second coming. Matthew has an end-time orientation here, believing that history is divided into two ages — a present, evil age that God would soon replace with a new age often called the realm of God or the realm of heaven. The old age is marked by injustice, exploitation, sickness, enmity between nature and humankind, violence, and death. The new age will be characterized by the complete rule of God and the angels, and by authentic worship, forgiveness, mutual support, health, blessing between nature and humankind, and eternal life.

For Matthew, God is acting through Jesus Christ to effect the change. The birth, life, and resurrection are the first phase of the transformation, with the complete manifestation arriving with the second coming. Meanwhile, Matthew's community lives in a conflict zone between the ages. And – spoiler alert – since the second coming hasn't actually happened, we also live in that conflict zone. God calls the ancient community, and our community, to follow the instruction and model of Jesus because Matthew wants those who are hearing this to be prepared. Not because we should always be looking over our shoulder waiting for judgment, but because we are called to treat everyone with love, acceptance, and generosity always.

Now, I recognize that the second coming of Christ might not be the scripture you came to hear this morning. Some of us have not even finished cleaning up (or recovering) from Thanksgiving, the stores have all had Christmas decorations out since before Halloween, but if you are like me, then you already feel months behind on Christmas shopping. There's a lot to do to prepare for the holiday season, especially considering that so many more people are traveling and visiting family for the first time in a while. Now, to add to your stress surrounding the coming of Christmas, I've added in the need to prepare for the second coming of Christ before we're even at the first arrival.

But stick with me because this year's Advent readings are all from the book of Matthew and the lectionary does a wonderful thing over the four Sundays. A shift happens over the next month from anticipating the dramatic, disruptive consummation of all things to a much more tender tone, still disruptive, preparation for the Nativity. The dramatic and disruptive passages can be jarring and even cause us to be afraid of what is to come. These stories, and even the birth story of Jesus, are used to illustrate the sudden and unexpected acts of God. But the message of Christ's return is not meant to frighten us. It is meant to give us hope.

The Christ who is to come, is of course, the same Christ who once lived among us on earth, and who is known in the gospel story as the friend and healer of those in need. Moreover, living in hope, expecting Christ's return, is integral to the Christian faith. It is only through the promise of this hope that we insist that there is more to the human story and God's own story than what has been experienced already.

The hope we have is not meant to be kept to ourselves. It is a communal hope. The church is a community of hope and responsibility in the world. Christian hope in the future coming and reign of Christ can generate a commitment to the future and the public good of humanity in this world.

While many preachers throughout time have preached the doom and gloom of the apocalypse, it's important to remember that this is not that. Matthew's words of needing to be prepared are not to threaten us into submission. Jesus's second coming is not a threat, but a promise. So, how do you prepare for a promise? This gospel lesson balances the surety of the promise of the coming of the Son of Man – the promise of God's nearness to our world and our lives – with the not knowing, the mystery, the whens and whys that mark our lives in the meantime.

Such promises call us to watch; to "be awake" not just for what is to come, but continuous preparation for what is already taking place in our midst. The promises of God urge us to lean forward toward the future in its entirety. When we recognize that the sure and certain promise that God's future and our future belong to this Messiah, the Son of Man, we can live into the promise of hope by searching for God's realm here daily. The surety of God's promise is to be near us as we live in faithful discipleship while waiting the coming of Christ our Lord.

There is a bit of a danger that can happen when we don't know the time or place that God's promise will be fulfilled. The danger is that not knowing turns either into not believing and despair or into wild speculation and fear. Then, when we do want to get into the Christmas spirit and the beginning of the new year sounds of the Advent trumpet with its themes of "coming," it might only fall on ears and hearts that are numbed by the "same-old, same-old." We might feel dull and say, "Well here we go again; what's actually new this year?" "Has anything really changed?" The problem for us is the sameness, the routine of it all – whether good or bad. The danger is that we will be lulled to sleep in the seeming monotony or the disappointing news of the world around us. When this happens, our failure is in not knowing the significance of this day – that each day is lived in the promise of the Lord's nearness.

The routine and the day-to-day is what is special about this Advent time of waiting. It's what is special about living in the conflict zone of the already and the not yet. God is always doing a new thing and always doing the same things. Like those who must prepare for hurricanes, we want to do our preparation well. We never know what each day will bring, but we do know that there is great mystery and the promise of the extraordinary presence of God even in the ordinary routines of life, or even in those disastrous events that make God's presence so difficult to envision. We need to ask God to enable our imaginations during this time of waiting. Because it takes imagination shaped by God's promises to see the poetry of God's working in the reality of today's same-old.

Some of God's promises are easy to envision. Sometimes we get to witness the amazing blessing of a baptism and see the promises that God is fulfilling in Jessie, Ben, and Tilly's life as well as the life of this congregation. But other times it's not easy to understand or envision God's hand at work when we see gun violence, greed, a growing gap that feels insurmountable between the rich and poor, hatred towards those who are different, injustice everywhere, and complacency. A lot of complacency.

It's our duty as Christians not to be lulled into complacency. We are called to care about all of it and to share a vision of radical hospitality, even when it's so hard. Because God calls us all, and empowers us, to witness faithfully to God's ultimate purposes of love, peace, joy, and abundance. Coming to this clarity and working towards those promises is a powerful way to prepare through Advent. May it be so in each of our lives as we reimagine and live into each day preparing for the coming of our savior who was and is to come. Amen.