

## *Testifying to Hope*

Luke 21:25-36

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My sermon today is entitled, "Testifying to Hope," and it is based on Luke 21:25-36, which Jane just read. It is the lectionary passage for the first Sunday in Advent. Typically, the first Sunday focuses on hope, the second peace, the third joy, and the fourth love.

Advent begins the church year, and one of the Gospels is chosen as the Gospel to read in worship most Sundays in that church year. The church calendar is on a three-year cycle, so we have just finished up Year B, and we are now beginning Year C. The Gospel for Year C is Luke.

Luke is the first volume of a two-volume work, which contains the books we know as Luke and Acts. Luke probably used Mark, as did Matthew. And our Gospel reading today is also found in Mark and Matthew. So, Jesus (or someone speaking in his name) said it, Mark wrote it down, and both Matthew and Luke adapted it. Another way to approach it is to ask, Who is testifying here? Jesus spoke it. Mark wrote it down, and Luke used it. (Paul refers to Luke as "the beloved physician," so that's why he has a stethoscope around his neck in the slide.)

For Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this passage appears in a section of the gospel called "the Little Apocalypse." The book of Revelation is also known as the Apocalypse of John, and this section of Mark--and thus Luke and Matthew--is known as the "Little Apocalypse." If you like the book of Revelation, then you will like this section of the three Gospels. If you don't like Revelation, then you won't like this section either. Both the Little Apocalypse—in Matthew, Mark, and Luke--and the Big Apocalypse—Revelation—speak about signs and wonders and clouds and the coming of the Son of Man.

The Little Apocalypse begins with the destruction of the temple, which Amie preached about two weeks ago, and it concludes with the coming of the Son of Man. But what were Jesus and Luke and the others talking about? Were they just crazy to talk about fear and foreboding and the powers of the heavens sh-sh-shaken? There's a whole lotta shakin' going on here. Lots more than Jerry Lee Lewis ever thought of. But after the shakin' comes the bakin', which is the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory. This is symbolic language, friends, which we are not to take literally. But what does it symbolize?

Twice in this passage Jesus refers to the Son of Man. At this point, I would like to bring up the work of my late mentor Walter Wink, who died almost ten years ago in Standisfield, MA, about an hour north of here. He wrote his last major book on the Son of Man, or as he translated it, the Human Being, even the true Human Being. Jesus says that the Human Being is coming with power and great glory. Now that's something to hope for: the true Human Being. True Human community.

So, on this first Sunday of Advent, we hope for a renewed humanity, for community not divided by geographic boundaries, racial and ethnic identities, by religious loyalties. A renewed humanity. Yes, yes, it's coming. Coming. O God, it's coming. It will not come immediately. For

Mark, it seems like the coming would be very soon, but for Luke, sometime must pass, though still in this generation.

And so we hope, we yearn, we grieve. We long for the new humanity to emerge. The full humanity. In peace and harmony. We hope and we testify to our hope. In this desperate world, we testify to our hope by living out our full humanity.

Jesus tells us in this passage to be alert at all times. Be alert, and to pray. Praying is not falling asleep. It is being alert, conscious, mindful, mindful of that full humanity that is dawning within us and around us. We see it as we gather in community. We see it as we pray, being mindful of love that is flowing as our breath. Our full humanity is here.

In advent we wait. We prepare ourselves. We hope for the coming of peace, of joy, of love. The coming of full humanity to ourselves, to all people. We are aware of our brokenness, our woundedness, yet also the healing of our brokenness. Our full humanity is dawning.

We are alert. We are awake to all that God has for us in this season. Our full humanity is dawning. God comes on. And God is that human one.

We testify to hope, hope in a renewed humanity. We hope, yes, we hope.

I conclude with Emily Dickinson's poem. The first stanza appears in the bulletin before the prelude. I will read all three stanzas:

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all,  
  
And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.  
  
I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.

And all God's people said, Amen.

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