

“Days of Hope and Expectation”
November 14, 2021

Daniel 12:1-4
Mark 13:1-8, 32-3

A couple of weeks ago, someone gave me a copy of an article from *The Washington Post* titled: “Is the Pandemic Fading? ‘Maybe,’ Experts Say.” I would like more than “maybe” from “experts,” but that’s the kind of answer we get.

These are the days of “Who knows?” of “Perhaps.”

You’ve probably seen similar articles.

Last month, *The New York Times* told us “Covid Will Be an Era, Not a Crisis That Fades.” WBUR in Boston offered the kind-of-encouraging report: “The Coronavirus May Never Go Away. But This Perpetual Pandemic Could Still Fizzle Out.”

But just this past week, *The Economist* confidently announced: “Covid-19 is likely to fade away in 2022.”

Could.

Likely.

We might want more certainty, but as the pandemic lingers and as we navigate our way along this constantly changing path and as we resume worship and look toward singing together, we hear a resounding: “Maybe.”

When I read church newsletters these days, or when I hear reports of national surveys, or listen to what people tell me about other congregations, I get the feeling that the pandemic is finally beginning to take its toll on some worshipping communities. They made it through the early days, they pulled together, but now there’s a sense that congregations are fraying, coming apart at the seams.

People are so worried about present dwindling resources they can’t see the opportunities that are coming their way. What *is* overshadows what *is coming*. The urgent rather than the important gets attention. The present wins out over the future.

Again, various articles ask: “Will people return to church?” and the answer appears to be, “Who knows?”

We would despair over this uncertainty were it not for what we hear in scripture.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson Jesus tell us *this* about the future: “*No one* knows.”

I would like more than that from Jesus, but that’s the answer we get.

The scripture lessons that we heard this morning can sound extremely pessimistic. They grow out of a sense that this world is beyond redemption and that only its complete destruction and the recreating of the whole scheme of things will be sufficient.

But what I like most about these texts is that they are so filled with hope.

If we listen long enough and closely enough, we begin to hear an astounding optimism: a message that grows out of an unshakable sense that God will indeed redeem not just us but the whole creation.

This peculiar combination of great pessimism *and* great optimism underlies the deep hope that we have as Christians. The *world* would have us choose—is the glass half empty or half full? Are you a gloomy, if easily deceived, pessimist or a cheerful, if naïve, optimist?

Our *Christian faith* tells us that the glass, the water, those who look at it and those who make judgements about it—along with all of creation—are held in the care of a loving God.

Christians are people of hope. Our peculiar symbol is the cross—an instrument of death—that seen through the eyes of faith tells of hope. One person put it like this: “The cross tells us that nothing is ever beyond hope, that after pain comes healing...And how do we engender hope in others? By living as Jesus lived his life and as he taught us: by feeding and healing, by making peace and loving God and all of God’s creation.”¹

We recognize that, theologically speaking, the world is, in the words insurance agents use to designate our wrecked cars, totaled. It is so deeply wrong that repair work is futile.

When we go out and feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, provide medical care around the world, we act not simply to repair but to announce something new: the old ways are shattered beyond fixing. In Jesus Christ the creator God has broken into the creation to begin something new.

The difficulty is that sometimes it's hard to tell the death pangs of the old world from the birth pains of the new. That might be our problem in these days.

A world of meaning and purpose and value, a world love and hope and faith comes slowly—but we have the hope that this world has already begun.

Here and there we catch a glimpse of it, often at the strangest times: when you embrace a loved one; when striving for quality, you lose yourself in your work; when you kiss your child goodnight; when you say “enough” to the violence that plagues us; when you refuse to succumb to the toxic hatred that is buried so deeply in each of us.

A few days before he will be arrested, Jesus is in Jerusalem. As he leaves the temple, one of his disciples comments on the size, the magnificence, the beauty of the buildings. “Hey Rabbi, look at all of this. Pretty neat, huh?”

Jesus looks around and says: “You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; they will all be thrown down.”

So much for the Jesus whose soothing words comfort us and reassure us that everything is going to be all right. But again, the message of Jesus was always more about hope than about comfort.

When Peter, James, John, and Andrew—four disciples who never seem to catch on to what Jesus is all about—hear what Jesus said, they sneak away and ask Jesus privately: “When will this happen? What signs should we be looking for?”

They want the inside track. They want to know what’s next.

So, Jesus says when you feel like everything is falling apart, don’t be surprised. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. . . .there will be earthquakes in many places; there will be famines. . .” Oh—and just because people are offering reassurance at every turn, don’t let down your guard, for there will certainly be false messiahs offering salvation packaged in every way imaginable.

What’s next?

As Gilda Radner used to say, “It’s always something.”

And it’s not over yet.

“You don’t know,” Jesus says. “I don’t even know,” Jesus says.

We will never be able to **so** understand God that we can explain everything or can arrange future events on a timetable that has any degree of certainty.

Jesus leaves us with one small piece of advice: “Keep awake.”

Open your eyes and *look*. There are many wonderful and amazing things to see. The living God continues to work in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, in unexpected places—even now, even among us. Those who are wise will look around and be ready.

The wisdom that we need for our time does not come from a high I.Q. Nor is it the practical wisdom that shows itself in skillful ability. The wisdom that we need is the wisdom all of us might gain when our eyes are open to the uncertain and unknown future that is always in the making. It is the wisdom we gain by keeping awake to what is around us and to the future that *we* are making, the future that God is making in us and through us and among us.

So, tell me. What do you do to stay awake? What is it that lets you keep looking ahead? What is the great hope in which you live?

The poet Robert Francis makes this appeal:

Keep me from going to sleep too soon

Or if I go to sleep too soon

Come wake me up. Come any hour

Of night. Come whistling up the road.

Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.

Make me get out of bed and come

And let you in and light a light.

Tell me the northern lights are on

And make me look. Or tell me clouds

Are doing something to the moon

They never did before, and show me.

See that I see.

That sounds like a request to a friend—and we need friends to help us stay awake. We need this congregation to help us stay awake.

Maybe those words are a prayer.

With friends and with God, then, let us seek to follow the suggestion of Jesus: Keep awake.

“No one knows,” Jesus says. I hear that and my spirit is flooded with relief. Yes, we don’t know. We don’t know the day or the hour when the realm of heaven will come breaking into our lives. And there is so much more that we don’t know in addition to this. The prophets reminded us that God’s ways are not our ways. We don’t know.

We don’t know.

And so, these days—and all our days—are a time of hope and expectation.

¹ The Honorable Frederica Brenneman, Connecticut Conference Annual Meeting, 2003.