

12.3.23 Advent 1

Hope Over Fear

Mark 13.24-37

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Today we start a worship series called **Fear Not**. When you're facing situations that might cause you to feel fearful or afraid, you have the power to choose a different response. James Clear noted, *"You are not the cause of everything that happens to you, **but you are responsible for how you respond to everything that happens to you.**"* You can choose with God's help to respond with hope, peace, joy, and love. This takes intentionality, discipline, and practice in terms of where you place your focus, how you spend your time, and what you choose to listen to, watch, and read. You also need to be wise and discerning in recognizing that fear is used for driving TV viewership, manipulating people's emotions, and thinking, and distracting or diverting people for one purpose or another. Today we begin our series by choosing **hope over fear**.

Traditionally in many churches, the Gospel reading on the first Sunday of Advent is about the second coming of Jesus. As we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, we're reminded that he promised to return and that we live in between those two events. In **Mark 13:24-37** we hear that even in the face of suffering that might cause some people to be fearful, we have reason to hope because God promises to return to gather God's people in love from the ends of the earth.

Mark 13:24-37, "But in those days, after that **suffering**, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, **and gather his elect** from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, **keep alert**; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, **each with his work**, and commands the doorkeeper to **be on the watch**. Therefore, **keep awake**--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: **Keep awake.**"

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the season in the church year we prepare our hearts for Jesus to come into our world anew at Christmas. The word advent means "arrival" or "appearance." Each Sunday we remember an attribute of Jesus: **hope, peace, joy, and love**. Our church, along with others, will light a candle each Sunday that represents our desire for that attribute to live and grow in us this season.

This is the Sunday of **hope**. Of the four Advent candles we light, **hope is the candle that burns the longest and the only one that burns by itself. Hope is what you hold onto even when you may not be feeling peace, joy, or love.** This lone candle is a symbol of how we desire hope to be sustained within us. Sometimes hope is the only spark we have left, but it's still burning. Think of the 41 workers trapped for 17 days inside a collapsed tunnel in the Himalayas who were successfully evacuated this week. How important is holding onto hope in situations like that? We give thanks with the people of India for all those who worked tirelessly to keep the workers alive, and those who came up with creative solutions to bring the men to safety.

How do we choose hope in the face of all that may be causing us to lose hope or to be fearful, afraid, distressed, or depressed? **First by understanding that no matter what you're facing, no matter what's going on in your life or in the world, you still have the power and the choice to choose to live in hope and not fear. As Christians we're called to be people of hope.**

Having a relationship with Jesus can give you the vision to see hope when hope seems lost. It seems like there's a reason to lose hope every day, but we still can get hopeful around Advent and Christmas. Think about how Jesus came into the world. Jesus came, not as a warrior emperor on a white horse, sword drawn with legions of

angels behind him. Jesus came as a humble, vulnerable baby, totally dependent on the love of his parents. That's the way our God came into the world.

There's nothing new parents can do to be prepared for how overwhelmed you are with love for a newborn baby. Grandparents will tell you the same thing. For us, when we're with our grandson Caleb, he can just be sitting on the floor smiling, babbling, and we're happy to be right there on the floor with him. We also know he's totally dependent on his mom and dad for survival and that they already couldn't imagine their lives without him. His presence has changed everything not only for them, but for all his grandparents and great grandparents. Caleb's presence changed everything for his parents just by arriving. Caleb hasn't done anything but **arrive** in our world and he's given us hope for the future. The birth of Jesus did that for **all people**.

Hope needs to be the lens through which we read passages like Mark 13 and anything about Jesus' second coming. We read it through John 3:16, *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."* Humanity has never been the enemy for God. The enemy has always been death. Fear and sin have been in active participation with the ways of death in the world rather than with the ways of love and life. Humanity and creation is what Christ came to save, not destroy. Sin and death are the enemy Christ is going to defeat permanently when he returns. Those who participate with death and its ways, those who work against the way of love will all fall away with death itself.

When Jesus says to "keep awake," he's asking us to be alert to the ways of hope and love in the world and not to be involved in the ways of death. So that when the Son of Man does come, and finally wipes away every tear and eliminates all the things that causes those tears, we'll be the ones who have already been helping him dry those tears too. Christ's birth and Christ's return are both centered on hope, not fear. Jesus came to bring hope to the world at Christmas and one day he will return to fulfill God's hope for the world.

If Christ is the reason we find hope around Christmas, the reason why so many saw hope in him when he first came into the world, and the reason why we can have hope for when he returns, then how can he be the reason for your hope today? What

areas do find hopeless in your life or the world around you? When you look at the state of your life or the state of the world, and you see the areas that make you fearful that change won't come, how can you allow Christ to reframe your perspective to give you hope in place of fear?

How can the reality of Jesus as redeemer, as prince of peace, as our rescuer, drive away things that leave you feeling fearful and hopeless? The action step Jesus gives us is **keep awake**. When we're awake and don't look away out of fear, we can find reasons to be hopeful no matter what we're seeing. Individually you need to choose hope over fear again and again and again, it's not a one-time decision, it's a choice we make countless times a day because fear can grow quickly and spread, and you need to recognize it when it's happening or starting, like an alarm going off, "wake up, recognize what's going on." Hope is a daily, moment by moment, choice. Actively look for hope and choose hope, whatever's going on, otherwise fear in subtle or obvious ways can pull you in, take hold, start controlling you, and lead you to do something terrible or irreversible. There are frightening situations in life and in the world that are constantly coming at us. The media pushes out stories like these every day. We're living in challenging, serious times that require intelligent, disciplined, and hopeful thinking and action to resolve the problems we face.

Paul tells Timothy (2 Timothy 1:7), that God didn't give us a spirit of fear, so I question the motives of anyone who attempts to use fear as an approach to life or leadership. As followers of Jesus, we're people of hope. Hope is like a foundation you build on. Hope is like the roots of a tree that keep it anchored in a storm. As a Christ follower, you make choices and act on hope. Hope is knowing God is with you as expressed in the truths of Psalm 139. God knows all your days, when you're awake or asleep no matter where you are or your circumstances, God is with you.

Hope is lighting a candle, pulling up the shades in the morning to a new day regardless of pain, grief, or whatever your circumstances.

Hope is finding ways to grow your faith because a deepened faith will stand against fear. Hope is grounded in faith.

Hope is letting go and collapsing in Gods arms when life's challenges feel too big.

Hope is grasping Gods hand when your body is betraying you and remembering you're not alone.

Hope is seeking Gods presence, being still, breathing out fears, breathing in hope.

Hope looks to the God of creation and remembers for everything there is a season.

Fear is like a prison. Choosing hope breaks down the walls.

Hope is making intentional choices rooted in truth. I'm not alone. God is with me. Light dispels darkness. Hope is choosing gratitude, faith, peace, joy, and love.

Hope is accepting mercy, and forgiveness and willingly extending them to others.

When fear has a vicelike grip on you, no matter what's happening, look to Jesus. He will not and has not abandoned you. Hope is Jesus loves me; this I know.

Like a solitary candle, there's a need to keep hope alive and not allow fear to rule our lives or days. In any moment, we can choose to cry to out God, *"I'm afraid, I'm fearful, I'm lonely, I'm heartbroken, help me,"* there are many psalms of lament that express these feelings and God hears our cries.

Hope is a daily, intentional choice. Fear isn't going to keep me captive. I'm going to keep growing my faith, standing on truth, lighting candle after candle of hope...hope over fear ...hope over darkness ... hope over illness and pain, hope over grief, it's a daily practice or discipline.... Otherwise over time subtle things can pull us back into fear. Keep choosing hope over fear.

I received an email yesterday from Ann and Bill Clemmer who were with us last Sunday before returning to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Dear Pastor Doug, What a warm welcome we had at BBC! Thanks for letting us share in worship. A quick update, the young boy in the front of the video Bizengamana (with the bright smile) who has been with us since the beginning... **went to be with family this week!! They found them after a yearlong search.** I thought folk would like to know. We appreciate each of you and are blessed to partner with you in touching lives of the street children in Goma in the name of Jesus. Joy as you begin the celebration of Advent! Love, Ann, and Bill

Hebrews 10:23 (NKJV) invites us, ***“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”*** Each Sunday of Advent to remind you of what God gives us in Jesus and wants us to choose and live every day, we have a Christmas tree ornament with the word of the week for those who would like one for their household. Please only one per household so we can get them to as many different ones as possible. Our word today is HOPE. If you’re watching online and would like them, if you contact the church office, we will send them to you.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as we live between your resurrection and your return, give us a steadfast faith to trust you, an enduring hope to wait for you, and an abiding love to live for you until the day of your return. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Blessing: May the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What areas in your life or in the world around you seem hopeless to you? If you’re in a group, is there one you’d be comfortable sharing?
2. How do you hold on to hope amid suffering, hardship, and challenges, whether those are personal or larger in scope?
3. The 13th and 14th chapters of Mark contains many variations of “keep alert,” “keep awake,” and other references to sleeping (see 13:33, 35, 37, 14:34, 37, 38, 41). Read those verses. What’s happening in each instance? What’s Jesus referring to? How well do the disciples respond to this exhortation?
4. What does it look like for followers of Jesus to “keep awake” today?
5. In the parable Jesus tells in Mark 13:34-36, each of the slaves has his or her own work in the household. How does being in and working in community help us to be faithful and awake in our time?
6. What practical steps or habits are helpful in daily choosing hope over fear? What can you do to lean into hope and away from fear?