

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Sermon for December 3, 2023

THE FOUNDATION OF OUR HOPE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: *For you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*

This morning we celebrate the first Sunday of the season we call Advent, the season in which every year we re-experience in memory the anticipation of the birth of Jesus in a manger. As children count down the days until they can finally open all those bright and tantalizing boxes under the tree, so we count down the weeks leading to what is, in a sense, the rebirth of the greatest gift of all, the gift of God's perfect and infinite love to each and every one of us. We commemorate that birth and the weeks leading up to it, and by remembering the new life of our Lord, we, in the reality of the spirit, we bring our Lord back to life. And just as the arrival of the Christ child ushered in a new and fresh spiritual reality into the material universe, so the remembrance of the birth of the Christ child ushers in a new and fresh spiritual reality for all Christians. It is the advent of a new year, a new beginning, for each one of us individually.

Because this is the first Sunday of the month, we'll be celebrating communion today along with the opening of Advent, but Advent and communion really both serve the same function within the workings of spiritual reality. When Jesus taught us to take the bread and wine in memory of

Him, he was pointing to the spiritual reality that memory itself is a resurrection, and thus a fulfillment of hope. Each time we remember Him, we bring Him back to life, not in some metaphorical or poetic sense, but in Spirit and in Truth. His life among us is renewed and sustained and strengthened. Whether He actually, materially exists in the bread and the wine can be something for theologians to argue about; but that His spiritual reality is reaffirmed and strengthened among us is beyond dispute. He is not the bread that remains in heaven; He is the bread that *comes down* from heaven.

Each of the four weeks of Advent is given a visible symbol by the four candles we light, and each of those candles represents one of the great elements of the Christian faith. And just as the season of Advent itself does, and just as the ritual of Communion does, so also when we light the Advent candle, we are in spirit rekindling that particular element, reestablishing it at the base of our own lives.

The first candle, the one we kindled this morning, is the candle of Hope. And that explains, perhaps, why the lectionary Gospel for this morning points us to those somewhat alarming verses we read from the thirteenth chapter of Mark, verses which quote Jesus saying various things using the extremely dramatic vocabulary and images that were common to Jewish so-called Apocalyptic writings of the time. Both Matthew and Mark quote Jesus saying very similar things, and it is fairly clear that all three of the gospel writers were in fact pulling together various things that Jesus is reported to have said at various times and on various occasions and presenting them as if they were part of a single discourse or speech.

Since we don't have the actual context in which Jesus said those various things, it's impossible to know exactly how they were intended, but one thing I think we can say for sure is that they do all have a foundation in Hope, and I suspect that's why the people who originally put the lectionary together chose to ask us to reflect on them here at the beginning of Advent. To read those verses the way many do, as simply forecasting the death and destruction of the world and many or most of those in it, would be a violation of the very Spirit of the season we are now beginning to celebrate. However those verses were originally uttered from the lips of our Lord,

we have the testimony of the rest of the New Testament that they were uttered in Hope, and not in threat.

Our Christian religion is at heart a religion of promise, of looking forward. We remember the past, of course, and in so doing we bring it back to life spiritually, but we do so only because of the hopeful faith that our resurrected lives live on into the endless future.

The first pillar of the Christian religion is hope, the hope that each of our lives is going somewhere, the hope that we are not just heading somewhere for a while, only to find ourselves back where we started, the hope that we are not just wandering for seventy or eighty or a hundred years from one scene to the next and that's all there is to it, the hope that life is not simply a stage and we poor players who strut and fret our hour upon it and then are heard no more, the hope that our efforts matter, that leading our lives in a certain way makes a difference, not just or even necessarily to 'history', but on an individual basis.

You sometimes hear non-Christian folk resting their sense of meaningfulness on thoughts of 'human progress' or 'the greater good for the greater number' or something along those lines. Our lives matter because we're contributing to a future where people will travel among the stars, or where people will live in perfect harmony or perfect health or perfect equality.

But do we really think that the significance of the life of some poor Irish ditchdigger who died a hundred year ago consists in how much he contributed to the development of electricity or the birth of democracy or the wonders of the iPhone? Obviously not. Then why would we say the same thing about ourselves today? The individual Christian's hope doesn't depend on whether the next generation lives in a metaverse, or whether the oceans rise another foot or two, or whether humanity someday reaches the stars. The Christian hope is that our lives have value in themselves, not based on the destination of the human race, but on the destination each of us has in the eternal household of our Father in heaven. The mother's love for each of her children doesn't depend on whether the child is part of some great and sweeping project to improve the human race. The mother loves her child, come what may.

And just so, the Christian hope is that our lives – that your life and my life – have an infinite value in the reckoning of God.

But now, here's what's important. Our hope is not just wishful thinking. It's a hope based on a fulfilled promise. And what is that promise? It's the promise we found expressed in the divinely inspired words of the prophet Jeremiah, words that might well serve as the spiritual promise of Advent:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

And the fulfillment of that promise was the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. The branch of David became flesh and dwelt among us in the fulfillment of the promise of God that He loves each and every one of us with an infinite and everlasting love.

“For God so loved the world” the Gospel of John tells us, “that he gave his only begotten child, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” That baby born in a manger in Bethlehem grew up to be our Lord and Savior, who lived a perfect life for us, and whose final words on the Cross right before he died were: “It is accomplished.” What was accomplished? What was accomplished was the fulfillment of God's promise that he loves his children, each and every one of us, with a parent's love; the fulfillment of God's promise that our lives are the first step of a journey with a direction, with a destination, with a meaning that doesn't depend on this world, but on the finished work of our Lord.

And so our prayer for this first Sunday of Advent, heavenly Father, is that we ever be mindful of the basis for our hope, the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who fulfilled for all eternity the promise of Your love for us, and we offer this prayer in His holy name. Amen