

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008
Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 16:1-4

TO THOSE WITH FEARFUL HEARTS

*Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.*

Advent Sunday always looks forward, inviting us to understand our present life situations and relationships in terms of the future God has promised us in Christ. In a world where all things have life cycles and fade with time, we can live with hope that does not fade. In a world where all good things are partial and even the best fall short and disappoint, we are empowered by faith in the crucified and risen Christ to grieve our losses without giving up hope. We do not need to protect ourselves from love because we fear grief or keep ourselves back from hope because we fear disappointment. Both come in life, to Christians as to all people, but God redeems and holds what we lose as we live and love, and the day will come at long last when all that life and death have swallowed up will be restored to us, healed and made whole.

Faith in Jesus, God's Christ, is not a way of rationalizing disappointment and loss. Faith neither accepts life as it is under the conditions of this world nor flees the world, despising the good in life. Understanding faith's balance, the interplay between realistic acceptance of life and unrelenting hope, is tricky, but we need to keep trying. Like everyone else, we must accept the losses we and those we love suffer in life and deal with those losses realistically. Life brings joy and sorrow. Love and friendship make life worth living but also bring disappointment and grief. In faith, however, we do not merely accept these realities, but keep committing them to God to heal and transform. We do not hold ourselves back from life and love because both will bring us pain in time. Neither do we dismiss our losses or other people's losses as unimportant in the grander scheme of God's view and plan. Rather, we embrace life and love, trusting God to redeem what we suffer or lose by living and loving.

Advent Sunday reminds us that the same Jesus who let himself care for people, who sought out the lost and shameful, who loved even the most rejected, and who gave up all he had in life to suffer and die on the cross, he is the Christ God raised to newness of life. And

the Jesus God raised from the dead is the Christ who is both with us now in life and, also, coming to us in the future to fulfill all God's promises.

Christianity has made both mistakes in its history, with sad and sometimes tragic consequences: the mistake of simply accepting this world as it is and the mistake of despising this world and fleeing mentally, emotionally, and spiritually into heaven. When Christianity has simply accepted the world and accommodated faith to its ways of power and prestige, Christians (especially the church's leaders) have become calculating, playing with people's faith the same cynical power games played by those with no faith at all. When Christianity has despised the joys and sufferings of this world turning its faith toward heaven beyond death, God's love for this world has been spurned by Christ's own church, and life here has been left without the hope Jesus brought into it.

During the Dark Ages, the focus of Christian hope shifted from earth to heaven. Life was short, bitter, and squalid. The people were kept in their miserable conditions by beliefs more superstition than faith and by systems designed to keep them from freedom and progress. There was little hope for them on earth, and their life here was said to be nothing but a time of bitter trial, to see if they would be permitted to enter heaven or would be cast into everlasting hell. In between those two irrevocable destinations, the church set purgatory, a place of purification through torment – in other words, more of the same as earth, but worse. So, the only possible future to shine with any hope was in heaven, and death became deliverance. To keep people from believing that terrible message too much and so taking their own lives to gain deliverance, the church declared suicide an unforgivable sin, and so compounded grief for the families of people overwhelmed by distress and despair. God does not abandon people in deepest despair. But by refusing to address the conditions of life with faith, hope, and love's compassion, Christianity left itself with little choice but to impose fear. Having offered people no hope on earth but only in heaven, the church had to keep people from escaping life to gain that freedom from misery.

God sent Jesus into this world as a fully human person like the rest of us because God loves this world and its people. God's promise is to redeem life not help us evade it. The gospel is not an escape hatch but empowerment to live with hope and compassion in a world of joys and griefs. The Incarnation—God's Word become human in flesh and blood—is God's living commitment to redeeming this world and bringing its life and history to fulfillment. Faith is for living in this world, and hope is for redeeming the life of this world. And if we live in faith, then we can die in faith when the time comes, trusting the God who loves us to hold on to us and bring us into life that death can no longer touch. Making heaven the sole or even primary purpose and goal of faith betrayed Jesus and his gospel by abandoning God's love for this world and its people, the Creator's love for the creation.

We begin our Vision Statement as a church, by declaring in faith, “We believe there is hope for this world because Christ has suffered and died for it.” That declaration raises many questions and commits us to wrestling with those questions, with all realism and hope faith can muster. How do we, for example, speak hope to fearful people during an economic crisis that will, indeed, diminish life and make people suffer, and how do we live the hope we speak? But that’s just one example. How do we speak hope to the fears of growing up, dealing with the rough teen years, or finding a good, healthful way into adulthood? How do we address the struggles of mid-life or the declining abilities of old age? In short, how does faith translate into helpful understandings of life with compassion? Well, if we let hope abandon earth in favor of heaven or turn against earth and long for its destruction, then the answer is simple: we don’t care about compassion or the struggles of this world but only about final judgment. But in that case, we need to realize we have abandoned biblical faith, and it is Jesus we have “left behind.” What does it matter then whether a child learns to read or a family is evicted or the vulnerable are victimized if the only issue is saved or damned? We follow the Christ who refused to give up on this world and, instead, gave himself for it. We need to remember that God works with us in the present and that compassion is the measure of our faith in Jesus Christ. With God, anything—even faith or hope—without love is worth zero.

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.” Fear drains our strength, even literally, physically, and discouragement saps our energies, making it hard just to keep going. In such times, we need to know God is present with us, understands, and cares. But that’s not enough. We need also to sense and believe that God is still opening the future for us, and strengthening us to go forward in hope.

Take heart because God has not given up on us or our world. Because God works with people and not only as individuals but as communities and nations, the promise often goes forward very slowly. Because life and salvation are both relational matters of love, friendship, and community, development takes time and must allow for mistakes, setbacks, and sins. But God is in it with us for the long haul and will not give up. There’s a new world coming, and it will be this world God loves transformed and made new by God’s grace. So we eat the bread and drink the cup to proclaim Christ’s death, until he comes. Amen.