

“Dare We Hope?”

Rev. Janet Scott

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Luke 21:25-36

“Is there any reason to face the future with hope?” someone asked me this week. I think that’s an important question, don’t you?

And, sometimes when we look at the world around us, when we hear the news, it’s pretty hard to make a case for living with hope!

Oh yes, there are signs of improvement in the economy. But how many people continue to be unemployed or under-employed? And who’s going to pay for the astronomical national debt we’ve assumed in order to conduct war and cut taxes?

And then there’s the violence. Always, the violence. Every day women and children are beaten—and sometimes killed—and weapons are used against others. And October has been the deadliest month in two years for United States troops in Iraq.

And that’s just in our own nation. Add to that the struggles of the rest of the world. Look at how many millions of people in the world live in lands where there is no work, no money, little food, and no hope that tomorrow will be even a little bit better. Listen to the reports of the latest famine in Africa, and AIDS on the rampage in many lands. Take note of all those who live under brutal leaders. How long has it been now that displacement of people and slaughter along ethnic lines has been going on in the Darfur region of The Sudan? How much longer will we have to hear of ongoing tension and violence in the Middle East?

In the light of all that—is it possible to face the future with hope?

The disciples of Jesus were wondering the same thing. He had just been talking with them about Jerusalem and the Temple. He had predicted destruction, catastrophe, and chaos. The disciples, understandably, were alarmed and asked if this would be the sign of the end of the world as they knew it.

“No,” Jesus replies. “The end of the Temple won’t mean the end of the world. In fact, I can guarantee you this: it’s bad all over now, and it’s going to get worse before the end comes!”

Well, thanks a lot, Jesus!

It reminded me of a sign posted in my childhood dentist’s office:

“They told me, ‘Cheer up! It could be worse.’

So I cheered up and, sure enough, things got worse!”

Yes, we can relate to the language of Jesus about “fear and foreboding” and the current troubles being only a prelude to worse days yet to come. We live as if we’ve got to grab all we can of life now, before it’s too late,

before someone or some turn of history takes it all away from us. We know what Jesus means when he talks of “fear and foreboding.”

So—is it at all possible to face the future with hope?

William Willimon refers in a sermon to the church’s long wait for Jesus to return and finally bring in the promised age of peace and well-being for all. It’s been a long time since Jesus was here and made that promise! So Willimon, thinking of a child peeking over a crowd to see a parade, or peeking over a window sill to watch for Grandma & Grandpa’s arrival, comments, “It’s hard to stand on tiptoe for 2,000 years.”

Yes, it’s hard to live expectantly when it doesn’t seem very urgent. It’s hard to live with expectation of what God will do someday when we’ve got more pressing concerns—going to work and school, planning our next trip, getting the kids to all of their events, spending time with our family and friends, saving money for the future, taking care of our health or the health of loved ones. It’s hard to live expectantly, it’s hard to even imagine the future, when we have all those things—and then some!—to worry about. Given all that, plus our anxieties about the state of the world, we know why it’s been “hard for the church to stand on tiptoe for 2,000 years.”

So is it really possible to face the future with hope?

Well, as is often the case, we need to take a closer look at the words of Jesus.

Yes, he speaks in this gospel reading about hard times coming for the people of God, about signs of the end, about “fear and foreboding,” about cosmic chaos, about the coming end of the world as we know it.

But Jesus also encourages Christians to live in such times with HOPE, not in fear and dread! Jesus instructs us to keep on living expectantly, hopefully, with anticipation! After all, Jesus says, chaos and evil and death do NOT have the last word. GOD has the last word! So, Jesus teaches, when it seems as if there’s nothing to do but run and hide in fear, I URGE you instead: “LOOK UP!—FOR YOUR **REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR!**”

Did you notice that? We might expect Jesus to speak about destruction; instead, he promises redemption.

And, as he speaks these words, Jesus is about to do just what he is promising.

Jesus is preparing to enter right into the jaws of evil and death, and suffer and be killed on a cross. Jesus is about to do battle with all the powers of sin and evil. Jesus is about to do this not out of despair, not because he is a victim of fate, but out of hope in the nearness of the kingdom of God. Jesus is about to accomplish our redemption and the redemption of all creation—setting us free from the power of sin and chaos and evil and death. Jesus is about to challenge the powers that be, and let them have their way with him, but then rise in triumph over death and the grave!

Jesus is about to have the last word. Jesus is about to accomplish the redemption of all and usher in the kingdom of God. And it is **PRECISELY** by going through things that would make the rest of us shudder in fear and foreboding that Jesus does what he says he will do!

This is the one who encourages us, “Look up! For your redemption is drawing near!” This is the one who announces, “The kingdom of God is near!”

Jesus isn't just making bold but empty claims; no, he has the power and might to do exactly what he says he will do—bring about our redemption and bring in the kingdom of God!

So what would that kingdom look like?

It would look like Jesus, dying and rising and ruling for eternity with a love and mercy that just won't quit—even in the face of horrible evil and certain death.

It would look like Jesus, gathering disciples from among the forgotten ones of this time, training and empowering them for a mission far beyond their wildest imagination!

It would look like Jesus, pouring life into a world that seems to be dying and giving hope to the hopeless!

And do you know what? I think that kingdom is near, right now!

I think God's kingdom is near when, once again, God comes to us as we gather around the Lord's table.

I think God's kingdom is near when God's people act selflessly, rather than selfishly, and feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless.

I think God's kingdom is near when God's people say "no" to violence, and act in ways that bring peace and reconciliation.

I think God's kingdom is near when the poor are lifted up, and the mighty are humbled, and rich and poor alike turn in faith and hope to God.

I think Jesus is absolutely right: the kingdom of God is near!

And if you agree, will you join me in looking up to watch for the coming of Jesus? Not looking down in fear, and not away, distracted from what really matters, and not around, as if our hope is somewhere else, but looking up—LOOK UP!—watching for the coming of Jesus!

Isn't that what Jesus urges us today? "Be alert! Watch! Pray!"

Jesus insists that we have reason to live with hope—not hide our heads in fear!

Early in the life of our nation, the Connecticut legislature was in session on a bright day in May, doing their work by natural light. But then something happened—there was an unexpected eclipse of the sun, and they were overcome by darkness. Some of the legislators thought Christ was returning, and they clamored for adjournment. They urged the body to turn to God in prayer. They wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord. The legislature was on the verge of panic.

But the Speaker of the House claimed the floor. A devout Christian, he acknowledged the darkness and the fear it stirred up in them. But, he went on, "The Day of the Lord is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. I therefore ask that candles be brought!"

Candles were brought, and the Connecticut legislature went back to its work.

That is how we, too, prepare for the coming of the Lord, living expectantly, whether that coming is soon or delayed even longer.

We do our duty. We worship God, and we grow together in Christ, and we serve God and others, and we reach out so that many can hear and know the good news. And we do it all joyfully, hopefully, and with purpose!

So the answer to our question is “Yes.” Yes, in Christ it is possible—possible to face the future with hope! Amen.