

ADVENT ONE

DECEMBER 1, 2019

WHITEHORSE UNITED CHURCH

Matthew 24, Isaiah 2

*“The geographers tell us we do not live on firm earth, but on giant moving plates
whose grinding passage and tortured depths give us earthquakes and volcano.
Jesus tells us that we do not live in firm time – but on giant shifting epochs, whose
transitions and changes are the advent of God.
Jesus challenged his culture's view of time -
it's not eternity and beyond, he's talking about
it's advent now
and within us” - John Dominic Crossan*

Advent is a call to a consideration of time. What it is, how we measure it; how we spend it, time as a commodity, time as a gift, time as a construct, time.

Preparation time for Christmas, in the world, is a time of hectic excitement – for some it's soul feeding

and for others it's draining in every way

Preparation time for Christmas in the church - ADVENT -

OUGHT to be

a time of.....depth. A time of saying “how are things with my soul”

a time of looking at the world, this world that God created and loves so much -

and saying, with God

where does the creation need to be mended - what is a good and holy use of my time today

And so in the church the colour is deep blue

the music is minor

the mood is one of waiting

waiting not passively but waiting actively, with intent.

Lurking, watching for hope, which has been so lately on the run; no recent sightings reported in public or private lives.

Time is a funny thing; Jesus is coming we say. Jesus will return some say. Isaiah says:

“In days to come” he says. “In days to come...they shall beat their swords into ploughshares.....spears into pruning knives; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; and never again shall they study war.”

But When? WHEN?

And how?

A lot depends on how you answer that – how you see time.

Let me ask:

If you were going to put world history on a graph, what would it look like?

Do you see time like this / (we're getting better and better)?

Or like this \ (everything is getting worse and worse)

or more like this ~~~~~~

Can you see that it makes a difference?

And you find all 3 world views in the Bible that's for sure. On this subject as on most others, Scripture speaks with more than one voice. (which is why I love it)

And the fascinating thing is that you can watch the NT authors struggle with that.

- at first, many expected his return immediately. Jesus had died, been raised, and then was gone from them. He promised, some said, that he would come back. Many believed it would be immediately, and in bodily form, and so they lived accordingly. Because they thought he'd return ...certainly within their lifetimes, no one wrote down any of the stories, there was no need. BUT as time went on, and he did not return as soon as they thought, or at least in the way they thought,
- and as some of them began to die, they thought “we'd better write this down” and so the gospels were written. There were many gospels. Of the many we have four in our Bible. In those gospels, we see the church struggling with the fact that Jesus is not coming back when or how they thought. You can read parables about the landowner who went away and left his servants in charge and no one knew when he was coming back...what's that about if not this struggle.
- And finally you see them coming to the conclusion that Jesus IS among them; he HAS returned. In Matthew 25 we read Matthew saying “If you want to meet Jesus here and now, then look at the poor. Look at those who are homeless, in prison, ill, and in all kinds of need.
- All this Matthew is writing (and the other gospel writers too) in the rubble of the temple that had been so recently destroyed by Roman soldiers. The sacred heart of their lives...., for them, the sacred heart of the world, had been destroyed.
- We listen to this, - we have to – or we do the text such a disservice – we listen to this while we stand beside those who had been traumatized by that violence: the survivors, those mourning the deaths of friends in that battle, the shell shocked soldier, just young, and newly aware that the job of soldier was not glamorous but cruel and soul sucking and left you empty inside...we listen, as we must, standing with the starving and the addicted....
- All of them longing, wondering, when will God be with us? Ever? IS there a God? When will it be?

It's all there – the coming of God among us. Is it some distant future? Right here right now? What about the past? Bethlehem?

– YES. YES.

And, Matthew says, keep your eyes open. Not everyone gets it. And sometimes the time isn't right -

BUT SOMETIMES IT IS.

Sometimes the time is exactly right.

Time, as we said, is a funny thing. Not all time is the same. Sometimes, there's a shifting, an opening -

pregnancy is a good image for that. Sometimes the time is exactly right, and we have to be alert.

Awake.

Did any of you listen to Mary Hynes' interview on CBC with Ronald Purser, the author of a book called *McMindfulness*? Purser himself is a Buddhist monk, a scholar, a practitioner of mindfulness, as Buddhists are. He was talking about the mindfulness industry that in his opinion has been detached from its spiritual and religious roots and intent, and now serves the status quo. He said that it can serve to keep us asleep, and powerless. Things would just be better in my life and the world if I practice this mindfulness. Alone. Just me and my inner world. No connection to a community, and no acknowledgement that what's wrong in your life is at least partly due to an economic and political system that serves the wealthy and tries to keep us all asleep because if we woke up we'd be so angry we'd do something about it.

So this year, when I hear Jesus say “stay awake” I am hearing him say...do NOT use your own religion, your own spirituality, prayer life, your own practices, as a way to stay asleep to suffering and the outer work of what God is up to in the world as well as in your own life. Stay awake. Because God is most certainly up to something in here AND out there. You don't want to miss it.

This season I've been on Facebook with three people for whom the time seems to be right. These are people who do not live here -

The first is a young woman, now in her 20s. Her name is not Jennifer but let's call her that. She is dreadfully unhappy; has been for a long time. She spends her days on FB posting about how unhappy she is, and telling the anonymous world, rather than the people who need to hear it, in person. For about a month now, though – she seems ready for a change. There's a change in her – she is no longer cutting herself to focus the pain, she is moving to a new location and...it seems that something has opened for her – a door, a glimpse – and she is stepping into it.

A family who had been estranged for years – some of its members are making overtures to others who are accepting them. Trust me when I tell you this is huge.

And finally a friend who just turned 50 and is now remembering and beginning to deal with some trauma from her youth.

I know you all have stories like that – and they are not only personal ones. All of these – for them this is like Advent time. Waiting, struggling, but something is trying to be born. For some reason, THIS time, now, they are seeing and acting on an opening – a chance to look at their lives and explore them and be open to what might happen now.

It's advent time for them. If that isn't God breaking in, what is?
What is for you?

Times like that can come quickly – sometimes brought on by something, often at midlife, have you noticed that? Or – it can be that the time is just – right.

I know that speaking this way is a middle class luxury, and that for many in the world, dealing with childhood trauma or family brokenness are just not possible when you have to worry about what you're going to feed your baby tomorrow.

This is World AIDS day, just for example. It's also the anniversary of the day, Dec 1, 1955, that Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. Dec 6th will be the 30th anniversary of the Montreal massacre at Ecole Polytechnique. These are signs of the sins, deep, ugly sins of racism, misogyny, homophobia..... and we only have to look at the news to answer those who might say – well that was then. This is now. We just need to open a paper to know a bit about wait it means to wait and to hope. Here, in our own community, and also in circumstances so tragic and so different from our own.

In the world, too, it seems as though there are times when things are just – ripe for action. Who knew that the Berlin wall would come down – who knew that a little girl from Sweden would inspire so many...who knewsometimes there are opportunities for hope that break open when we're at our most despairing. Like a door suddenly appears.

What Matthew is calling us to, I believe, is to be alert. Keep eyes open, antennae up – able to recognize an Advent opportunity when one is presented. Maybe help them along.

How?

One last thing I found helpful this week. It's the expression from Isaiah - “training for war”

We will prepare ourselves best, I believe, by not training for war. Any more.

Discipline ourselves to think in terms of possibility and promise – co-operation, life, peace

for too long the world has trained us for war.

Teaching us to think us and them.

(can I just take one minute to whine about reality TV? WHY is everything a competition and WHY do people watch others be humiliated and lose? Why is everything a war, a challenge, a contest?)

Bigger is better, loudest is right, for me to win you have to lose...

we enter discussions armed – yes armed – with reasons we're right, when we listen to others we're already forming what we're going to say next...we enter meetings ready for a fight – expecting opposition and planning ways to win.....assuming that those who have a different opinion also have malicious intent....this is the way of the world.

This is training for war. This is forming our minds and our thinking to only one way of looking at the world. And the way we speak and the way we imagine and conceptualize things becomes flesh and dwells among us -
in this way we create our worlds

May I suggest that we challenge ourselves this Advent season.

That we not train for war any more.

That we begin by – getting enough sleep

(What would world politics be like I wonder, if all the leaders and people who make decisions that affect the world..if they all got enough sleep?)

and enough exercise to keep our spirits alert

that we discipline our hearts and minds to discern the movement of the spirit – the infinite possibilities for hope and peace and justice in every situation
and finally this:

Two images help me when I am at my most hopeless.

The first is this:

Do you remember when you were 15 and had a crush on someone who didn't know you existed? What did you do? You hung around in places where you were likely to run into that person. Right? I'm suggesting that when we are hopeless, we treat hope like that. If you need hope – go where you're likely to run into it. Just to be around others who are hopeful. Just to be where it is.

And the second is this: It might sound silly to you but I have in my head an image of a huge vat in the sky: and in that vat is hope for the world. Sometimes it's pretty full, and sometimes ...not so much. When I pray at night, I review my day and I ask myself – have I contributed to the amount of hope in the world today? Have my words and actions put more hope in that vat..is it fuller this evening because of how I've lived my life?

A poem by Heaney says the same thing so much more elegantly than I

Human beings suffer.
They torture one another.
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.
History says, Don't hope
On the side of the grave,
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea- change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles.
And cures and healing wells.
Call miracle self-healing,
The utter self revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
And lightening and storm
And a god speaks from the sky
That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.
It means once in a lifetime
That justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme

Keep awake my friends
the time is coming
and already is

the time is ripe and something is waiting to be born.
May it be born in us.