

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

1) Hope

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On December 17, 1927, the crew of the S-4 submarine was trolling beneath the waters of Cape Cod Bay, taking part in a routine drill to test their vessel. When the submarine surfaced, it did so in the direct path of the Coast Guard Cutter, "Paulding." A collision was unavoidable. The result was tragic. The cutter rammed the submarine and it promptly sank within five minutes, sending 40 men to the bottom of the bay. Rescue efforts were hampered by stormy weather and it took nearly 24 hours for a skin diver to reach the hull of the sub, resting a hundred feet below the surface.

When he did, he could he could hear tapping coming from inside the vessel. He responded by using a hammer to communicate with the trapped men through the language of Morse code. Learning that there were six survivors trapped inside the sub, the rescue team redoubled its efforts to somehow free the men. Tragically, the weather proved to be too great an obstacle to overcome. There was nothing further that could be done.

With their air supply dwindling, the men used Morse Code, once again, this time to tap out a final haunting question: "Is there any hope?" Sadly, hope would arrive too late to save them.

As we consider the current landscape of the world as we have come to know it in this the 21st Century, it is a question that we find ourselves asking as well...

Is there any hope? With polar ice melting at an alarming rate and weather patterns changing dramatically, is there any hope for our beleaguered planet?

With terrorism reaching a new level of intensity and sophistication, is there any hope for civilized society?

With the future well-being of our children and their children increasingly perilous and uncertain, is there any hope for a better world?

If we were to take a survey, this morning, asking whether or not hope plays an important and prominent role in people's lives, I am not at all sure that the result would be characterized as "hopeful." For the fact is that it is fear and not hope that so often seems to be winning the battle.

In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks, we have been witnessed the growing fear that has characterized the response of some who insist that our response should be to deny Syrian refugees access to our country. I read recently of various political leaders who were advocating responses to the Syrian refugee crisis that range from closing our borders to rounding them up and placing them in internment camps, much like was done to the Japanese during World War 11.

It's amazing to me just how quickly our fear can get the better of us, enticing us to take stands that contradict the principles and values of inclusion and acceptance that we cite as foundational for our country.

There has been an outcry over the past two weeks to "get tough on terrorism" and by that, it is meant that we must respond to the violence with more and greater violence. What is needed, we are told, is more bombs and bullets and troops.

While I certainly understand the inclination to think and act this way, I simply do not believe that the war on terrorism can be won primarily on the battlefield. Lest we forget, the war in Iraq did not secure a victory over terrorism. Instead, it merely created the seedbed that would grow a new wave of terrorists, some of whom now claim the name of ISIS.

As much as our fear might tempt us to think otherwise, violence only begets more violence--not peace. And if we allow our fear to have its way, we will never break the cycle of escalating violence. This scenario, of course, is not new in the human story. It is as old as civilization itself. Certainly, it was familiar to the Jewish people of first century Palestine who experienced the oppression of Rome whose motto, by the way, was "peace through victory--military victory. Rome believed that if they just conquered everyone and then kept them living in fear of their might, they could create Peace out of threat. But that, of course, is not really peace. It's just a different form, a somewhat disguised form, of warfare.

Against this backdrop of fear, oppression and violence, an apocalyptic vision of the world and its future took root among the Jewish people. This vision suggested that the present age (the age of Roman rule) was evil and irredeemable. But it was an age that was about to end. The forces of good and God were engaged in a struggle that would result in the death of the age of evil and oppression and the birth of a new age--the age of God's righteousness and justice. Those who were faithful to this vision would be rewarded with a place in this new kingdom, this new age of God's righteousness.

This, in a nutshell, is the essential message, for example, in the Book of Revelation--one the primary apocalyptic books of scripture. In our lesson from Luke's Gospel, we read of the dark images that would accompany this change of from the old age to the new...

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth, distress among the nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Luke 21: 25-26)

Rather than allow ourselves to be put off by this strange and dark imagery, it is important, I think, to understand its primary purpose and intent. It is, in its own strange way, the language of hope--the language that suggests that, in spite of the evil and injustice of this present age, God is at work and God is going to win. The Son of Man will come to usher in a new age.

I use it as my primary reference point this morning as we think about the "sign of the time" that is hope. Like the first century Christians who read the Gospel of Luke, we have little trouble pointing to our reasons for fear. For not only can we point to the social realities

that strike fear within us, but we can also name the personal fears that we face in the relationships that we share, in the work that we do and in the meaning of life that we seek.

It is, suffice it to say, a fearful time, one in which many people are asking the question, "Is there any hope?"

This season of Advent dares to answer this question, appropriately enough, by lighting the candle of hope. In one sense, this is a defiant act, one that is taken in the face of fear and doubt and darkness. It is liturgical way of insisting that, in spite of the darkness that surrounds us, there is a light that burns in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it and will not ever overcome it. Our hope, in other words, will overcome the darkness of fear, as great as it may happen to be.

This is the premise and the promise with which we begin the season of Advent. But here is the challenge: If this is to become more than merely a ritualistic dream, if it is to become more than an idle promise, we must make the choice to allow our hope to become incarnational--that is, to actually live and breathe and act within us as an integral part of who we are.

The hope that I am speaking of, you see, is not merely wishful thinking. It is something more than simply "hoping against hope" that what we want to happen will happen. That form of hope doesn't take us very far and it will likely and inevitably, lead us to disappointment and despair.

No, the hope that I am speaking about this morning is the "open eyed" hope that sees the world as it truly is with all of its fear and insecurity and chooses, in spite of the odds, to align itself with the forces of light and of love, the forces of good and of God. This is a hope, you see, that refuses to be intimidated by all of the headlines and their litanies of loss and despair and chooses, instead, to create headlines of their own--headlines of healing and hope, headlines of possibility and promise.

This hope that I lift up for your consideration this morning is the hope that is grounded, the hope that is rooted not in our own aspirations and dreams, but in God's aspiration and dream for our world. It is a hope that recognizes the reality of evil and violence and terrorism, but refuses to allow that reality to diminish its determination to align itself with those who, in the everyday choices that they make, are choosing to light a candle rather than curse the darkness.

Allow me to ask, this morning, what this choice might look like in your own life?

**Where are the places where fear lives and the darkness is great?
What attitudes toward others have been tainted with the feeling of hopelessness?
What attitudes toward our world as a whole have convinced you that there is nothing that can be done, that despair is the only viable option?
In what places and with what people do you find it difficult to believe that there is any reason for hope?**

I think that it is safe to say that we all have them, that we all know, first-hand, the struggle to be hopeful in the face of so much that is darkness. This is, after all, the challenge of the human condition.

But we have gathered this morning in the understanding that even this darkness cannot overcome the light that came into the world in Jesus...that even this darkness cannot prevent us from grounding ourselves in the great and timeless hope that God is at work in our world through people like you and me who are obstinately obsessed with the conviction that God is going to win...that the age of God's goodness and justice and mercy is advances every time we choose to light a candle by welcoming the homeless and the refugee, by practicing grace in the relationships that we share, by respecting the earth and choosing to be stewards of its resources.

No doubt you will hear many in the media and in everyday conversations that will suggest that in one way or another, we have little reason for hope. It seems to be a popular conclusion these days. But I beg to differ and I beg you to differ as well. We do have every reason for hope and we are reminded of that fact in the candle that we have lit and the journey that we now begin through this season of Advent.

Let us leave the cursing of the darkness to those who have no reason for hope. Let us choose, instead to fan the flame of hope in the everyday choices that we make and in the witness of compassion, kindness, mercy and justice that we share.

Amen.