

# *A Candle in the Night*

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Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

## I.

We live in uncertain, anxious times.

For most of history, people have lived in anxious times. Centuries before Christ, Jeremiah the Prophet foresaw national ruin and exile. He needed hope: he looked to a future beyond exile, with a King like David.

It was an anxious time when Luke's Gospel was written, half a century after Christ. In the long shadow following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, Luke remembered Jesus' words, calling his followers to faithfulness: steadfastness in the midst of treachery, uncertainty and anguish; hope in the face of desperation.

"In those days ... I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." Centuries after Jeremiah, the followers of Jesus found fresh meaning in the ancient promise! They put their hope in a different kind of savior, coming not just for one nation but for the great struggling masses of humankind! They put their hope in One who had tasted their need, their suffering. Where some saw signs of the End coming, Luke saw on the barren branches of a disastrous time the leaves of God's future starting to sprout—signs of summer coming. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Jeremiah's hope, Luke's hope, both remind me of the hopes of exiled South Africans I knew during the apartheid years, individuals who sustained hope for a new day of freedom. And yet they of course were yet caught by surprise when the day actually came!

Old words come to have new meaning. "New occasions teach new duties, Time", in the words of James Russell Lowell's hymn, "makes ancient good uncouth. They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." What are you looking for, in the days leading up to Christmas? What Hope do you find, in God's future?

## II.

People go looking for hope in some strange places. Growing up, I didn't get the indoctrination about the second coming, that some of my friends did. There was in our house hardly a mention of the return of Christ for a second time, or the end of the world as we know it. It wasn't where my parents put their trust. Ours was a religious family. But we

learned a faith more about this world than the next. We learned about how “God so loved the world,” not about a world-destroying God. It was a shock learning in college and graduate school that many, even today, expect the world to end any day. At the very church where I worked back then, they talked about some guy named Hal Lindsey and the “Late Great Planet Earth.”

And now this week’s confession. Remember the nervousness just before the year 2000? OK. Truth: I never bought it. But being a good boy I was one of the millions who followed the advice of local government leaders—and against all my better instincts I bought two five gallon containers of purified water for our basement in preparation for New Year’s Day 2000. And some canned beans. I felt silly, but hey, what would it hurt to put some plastic containers of drinking water in the basement? But guess what. No Millennium bug. Minor issues with computer clocks. Here we go, another thousand years come and gone. Just like all the other false alarms of the world’s end, Y2K turned out to be a dud.

Now we are at it again in 2015. I KNOW you have Christian friends who are spouting about Armageddon today. I do. They are pushing for it. I’m not talking about a few radical Islamic militants. I’m talking about my crazy Christian friends. Don’t pretend it isn’t so. But that isn’t where we place our hope or trust, that isn’t our candle in the night. And by “we” I mean both Muslims and Christians of good will. Because we in both faiths have higher better hopes than some bloody conflagration.

How do we reclaim the Hope for the Future that is our legacy from the early church? On this first Sunday in Advent, when we light a candle of Hope in church, how shall *we* find fresh meaning in the ancient words?

### III.

Listen in with me today on two conversations. First from a small classroom in a seminary where pastors met for bible study. Once upon a time, at the beginning of Advent, I surveyed a group of friends. “Where do you find hope?” I asked.

Not one person there in that admittedly small pool of Christian leaders expected or hoped that the world was soon to be destroyed or overturned suddenly by divine intervention. That included me. And yet when I asked them each to share some personal sign of hope for God’s future—to share something of what they wait and long for in anticipation, in God’s future, the candles burned on. Everyone had something to share. One friend dared to insist on a coming day when there will be no more war. Another friend dared to think of a day perhaps as much as a thousand years away when the separation of humans into different races will finally be completely forgotten and no more. “The world of my childhood has changed”, he insisted. Another simply used the word “Shalom”—a Hebrew word that may be untranslatable—she summed it up as “when justice and peace kiss”.

As I listened to that little circle talk about their real hopes for God’s future, I was struck that to some the discussion might seem absurd. But it wasn’t absurd—because hope is

what gives us the capacity to endure. Our hope is not just cheap optimism. No, it is the commitment that keeps us willing to take chances, to speak up, to act up, for the sake of causes that are at best long shots.

Hope is what gives us the ability to speak and act on the basis of what is right, what is possible, and what is faithful, not simply on the basis of what is expedient, probable or profitable. Hope is what gives us the capacity to lift up our heads and believe that redemption not only for us but for all of humanity is drawing near.

Since a time before remembering, we have walked the face of this round earth carrying fear and carrying hope. Hope takes so many forms! Hope may be a wordless longing, just an ache in our bones. Often times fear distorts our hope—and we must work it through in order to come to a place of clarity and light. Yet hope prevails, and hope stretches us to become readier than we have been; more compassionate than we thought ourselves able; to be more than we have been.

Wrote W.E.B DuBois: “Eastward and westward, storms are breaking,--great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable.”

Second conversation. Listen in again! One Thursday night some years ago, I gathered with a couple of hundred people in Antioch Baptist Church on Joseph Avenue in Rochester New York. It was a meeting being held in a tragically torn community. We were there to talk about a community-based response to violence. We were asking folk to say what they felt needed to be done, what they needed to do, the standards our community needed, block to block and street to street in one suffering city, to radically reduce the violence. As they spoke, I was listening.

There was so much passion, so much anger, so much searching. As I listened, I heard the raw pain of loss. I heard fear. Yet emerging from the fear, there was a fresh sense of what we might be looking for, a hope worthy of our attention. I listened to an African-American man who works delivering utilities to our neighborhoods, as he talked about the illiteracy rate he encounters among young adults with children. He talked about needing to raise our expectations for literacy. I heard another person, this one Latino, talk about the need to restore a culture of respect, for family, and for neighbor. He talked about return to a respect for truth, and teaching children that lying and cheating are not acceptable. I heard the voice of the woman who took notes for our little group of twenty or so rise up as she reported to the larger meeting. As she repeated what others had said, she gave the words fresh meaning and emphasis of her own. She wasn't just reporting. She was proclaiming hope.

#### IV.

This weekend we have as a nation yet again experienced violence—this time in a Planned Parenthood building in Colorado Springs. Numerous police have been wounded, and one killed, along with several others dead and wounded.

This weekend we have also been witnessing young people of faith, particularly in Chicago, as they tried to respond to violence and the cover-up of violence with feet, with presence, conviction, insistence. I want you to know that in Chicago, providing leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement are two young people with roots in this church—Jason and Jestine Ware, whose parents Barbara and Michael were members here before the family moved to Rochester in the 90's. I want to honor the ways in which Jason and Jestine, along with thousands of others, are speaking out against the abuse of power, insisting that the stolen life of one poor black 17 year old child is precious in the sight of God, and demands justice. They are acting with conviction—and that conviction, well, I don't know about you, but it gives me hope.

Even those early Christians weren't just waiting for Christmas and the baby Jesus. Their hope was focused on the return of their beloved messiah, the Human One, to right the wrongs, to liberate the oppressed and set free the prisoners, to make the last first and the first last. Luke's Gospel, which we will be reading together in the months ahead, is a great prophetic voice of hope for the poor and the dispossessed in the New Testament. Surely there is today as deep a need for redemption to come on the wings of heaven, as ever there was. Our collective situation as humans is desperately in need of some radical, even revolutionary Hope. This-worldly hope.

Hope is found wherever the Spirit of God takes hold of us and gives us to see beyond the despair, to a better world. Sometimes violence or numbness, privilege or fear threaten to snuff out the candle. But then it emerges again. It emerges whenever we grasp hold of a vision of healing for humankind, for creation. It finds us when we find a God who can speak through the unexpected, a God who takes hold of the unreachable, cooks up love in the place of hate, and lights courage in the face of suspicion and passivity. It is whatever stretches us, opens us, to live by a wider faith, not a narrower belief.

On this first Sunday in Advent, may each of us find new clarity, a fresh vision. And may the Holy Spirit grab your hand, re-light your candle and escalate your engagement.... Amen.