

## Sermon on Hope

Good morning. I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving. Now it's time for Advent.

It's not accidental that advent and adventure have the same root. Advent is meant to be an adventure. But what kind? Why? What's involved? Perhaps it's because my wife writes about pilgrimage, but I think the adventure of advent is best seen as a pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage begins in the life of a person or of a people in a period of flux, uncertainty, and often very hard times. In our liturgical calendar we have just been through periods of apocalypse as the Jewish people suffered one wave of subjugation by empire after another. In Jesus' time we find his people living under harsh Roman rule and they strongly desire a messiah to liberate them. Often the Hebrew bible shows people lamenting their conditions—their pilgrimages begin with lamentation.

At the same time, their stories tell of past times when they were liberated, and so the lamentations in Jesus' Palestine also have a flavor of hope. This first Sunday of advent is often called the week of Hope. Thus we

begin our advent pilgrimage dealing with great burdens but with genuine hope.

Let's bring this framework down to our world 2000 years later. An image that sticks in my mind from Jane's powerful sermon two weeks ago is of her spending five months in bed with her second pregnancy while raising a toddler. She suffered a great deal but the chance her child would be born healthy provided hope in the midst of what must have been a very hard time. And she must have experienced a powerful (and painful) spiritual birth as the centerpiece of her pilgrimage.

We could reflect on our individual and collective journey through a worldwide pandemic. I don't know if it's an apocalypse, but it has often felt like one. But let us take up an even greater difficulty we face than the pandemic, a true apocalypse—global warming. The recent COP26 conference in Glasgow helped raise awareness of a coming apocalypse we have been hearing about for decades, and many of the world's governments and other organizations finally seem serious in their pledges to help reduce warming to 1.5 degrees Centigrade by mid-century. But clearly much needs to be done to reach this extremely difficult benchmark. Truly we should begin our Advent pilgrimage in lamentation!

When we were in central Alaska several weeks ago we took a hike through a nature preserve with a local volunteer. Unlike Bud, we weren't dressed quite warmly enough for the 5 degree weather. We had on winter coats, long underwear, wool socks, hats and mittens. Even so, Lori had to leave the tour early—she got cold feet! Bud wore tennis shoes, a light jacket and a light hat. Like many people in Fairbanks we saw, the transition to winter clothes hadn't happened yet.

Bud was very knowledgeable and entertaining. But when we got to a place where the overland trail turned into a wooden walkway, he became serious and asked us if we believed in climate change. We told him we did and he sighed in relief, telling of being reproached by a tourist for spreading rumors. Bud then proceeded to tell us why the walkway was erected and why the thousands of Alaska birch we could see were dead or dying.

I have read about how climate change is affecting arctic regions, but this was my first encounter with melted permafrost. In the past decade or so the area we crossed on the boardwalk has sunk five or six feet, and even though the boardwalk is recent, it too is dying in that it was bent and broken. Bud recently had a first-hand encounter with the methane, a serious greenhouse gas, that is being released as the permafrost melts.

You can see large bubbles of gas under the ice in places like where we were walking. He decided to see how real the claims about methane were and he chopped a hole in the melting ice and lit a match. He laughingly said he was lucky to only have singed eyebrows from his experiment!

Most of you know that I spend a great deal of time outside. Last August, when I suffered my second mosquito bite of the summer, I found myself yearning for the good old days when you would be attacked many times most days by these blood-sucking pests. I know, I'm a bit strange. But I got to thinking about the cascade of effects of just the disappearance of mosquitoes. We've seen no amphibians in our neighborhood for several decades. The night hawks disappeared from our skies a decade ago, as did most bats. And what did they eat? We have fond memories of an old friend who used to take us across the street at night to watch the spectacular light show of countless lightning bugs that graced the field behind our neighbors'. Now we're lucky to see a handful.

I could go on far too long for most of you, I'm sure. But each of you could add your own stories of how global warming and over population, teamed with lawn and farm chemicals and habitat destruction, have diminished the world around us. This apocalypse unfolds daily with ever

more sad and frightening news. We're all tempted to turn off the news, to become inured, numb, or in denial. The ancient Hebrews grew used to their subjugation, but at some point they needed to face reality and marshal their resolve, their faith, and look for liberation. We must do the same with our apocalypse and find ways individually and collectively to address this human made, no longer slow-moving disaster.

Faced with arguably the worst apocalypse in human history, what signs of hope are there? Can we truly begin this Advent with hope in our hearts? Let me suggest a few signs.

- over 100,000 people, mostly young, marched in Glasgow daily during the COP26 conference

- for the first time reducing the use of coal and oil were discussed, paving the way for more serious efforts at next year's conference

- China and India, two prodigious greenhouse gas producers were there and made some serious pledges

- most nations of the world are more or less on the same page and are making serious pledges

- a growing number of people around the world are no longer in denial about human caused global warming

Again, I could go on, and that's the point. There are many signs of hope, and I'm sure you could add to this list.

Let me end by calling our attention to features of Christianity that should help us respond to the coming apocalypse with strong resolve and hope.

-there were about 20 disciples who left the upper room and carried their good news mainly to gentiles. By the time Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire there were a million converts. Today about 1/3 of the world's population is Christian. Just think what a force for responding to our apocalypse we could be if we became a true worldwide community that cared about creation.

-and we say we value God's creation as a holy gift, not merely as a set of resources for our use

-Jesus models for us, and calls us to follow him, to live simple, non-materialistic lives

-we value community as well as individuality, and we

know how to bring people together for the common good

We are people who believe in cooperation, unpredictable results (miracles), the beauty of creation, and hope. I would like to give you a gift of a poem by David Whyte that I think speaks to the most important ingredient if we are to turn away from an impending apocalypse. Love.

>>>>>poem>>>>>>>

I submit to you that this love poem which is read at many weddings, also applies to our religious faith. As Bishop Curry so often and eloquently reminds us, Love is calling us. God is with us as we strive together to help heal creation for all God's creatures. Amen

THE TRUE LOVE  
*by David Whyte*

There is a faith in loving fiercely

the one who is rightfully yours,  
especially if you have  
waited years and especially  
if part of you never believed  
you could deserve this  
loved and beckoning hand  
held out to you this way.

I am thinking of faith now  
and the testaments of loneliness  
and what we feel we are  
worthy of in this world.

Years ago in the Hebrides,  
I remember an old man  
who walked every morning  
on the grey stones  
to the shore of baying seals,  
who would press his hat  
to his chest in the blustering  
salt wind and say his prayer  
to the turbulent Jesus  
hidden in the water,

and I think of the story  
of the storm and everyone  
waking and seeing  
the distant

yet familiar figure  
far across the water  
calling to them

and how we are all  
preparing for that  
abrupt waking,  
and that calling,  
and that moment  
we have to say yes,  
except it will  
not come so grandly  
so Biblically  
but more subtly  
and intimately in the face  
of the one you know  
you have to love

so that when  
we finally step out of the boat  
toward them, we find  
everything holds  
us, and everything confirms  
our courage, and if you wanted  
to drown you could,  
but you don't  
because finally  
after all this struggle

and all these years  
you simply don't want to  
any more  
you've simply had enough  
of drowning  
and you want to live and you  
want to love and you will  
walk across any territory  
and any darkness  
however fluid and however  
dangerous to take the  
one hand you know  
belongs in yours.

