

Keeping Hope Alive

Text: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Delivered: Christian Church of Pacific Grove in Pacific Grove, CA

About a week ago a friend of mine from high school caused controversy after she posted a comment on her Facebook page as to why she does not let her children watch the famous Christmas classic, "Home Alone."

If you aren't familiar with this popular film from the 1990s, the movie is about a 10-year-old boy named Kevin who is accidentally left home alone for a week when his parents and family head to Paris for Christmas. While Kevin is at first overjoyed that his family forgot him at home allowing him to eat ice cream out of a mixing bowl for dinner, Kevin soon finds himself defending his parent's house from invaders who seek to rob it by creating booby traps to catch robbers.

While at first, I found myself believing my friend was silly for not letting her children watch "Home Alone," I thought about it and started to see her point even if it was my favorite Christmas movie as a kid.

"Think about it," she wrote. "The movie is about two upper middle class parents who are so neglectful that they forget to take their 10-year-old son on vacation leaving him home alone to defend their house by burning one of the robbers with an iron, hitting another with a led pipe, and then right before these robbers kill him with a shovel, an elderly neighbor saves the boy and teaches him about the importance of Christmas three minutes before the movie ends and the closing credits role.

Even though I still consider Home Alone a classic American Christmas story, I suppose my friend has a point about being concerned by the amount of violence which is found in Home Alone, a movie that is classified not only as a children's movie but one that's classified as a Christmas movie too.

I think this movie is hard for a lot of parents to show their kids because for most of us, we feel a sense of sacredness about the Christmas season—a season which is supposed to be season filled with love, joy, family, and hope and is supposed to be a break from the violence, oppression, greed, and despair that we face in our world the rest of the year.

However, while we do our best efforts to remind ourselves about the importance of this season by cherishing its sacredness and if we are lucky, return to the innocence we felt about the Christmas season as children, the realistic truth is that we cannot separate this season from a world filled with despair, fear, injustice, and oppression. In a way, separating the two is more difficult that separating a pair of white blinky Christmas lights from a pair of those blinky green and red colored ones.

This is because for us the unfortunate reality is that despite our best efforts of trying to escape our world during the Advent season, our world cannot escape us.

From the heartache from the terrorist attack in Paris a few weeks ago and now the growing fear from the warnings of another pending terrorist attack, this time in our own country. To the news of another senseless shooting in Colorado on Friday and the overwhelming grief of living in a country so paranoid about losing its right in bare arms that there hasn't been any legislation passed to help stop guns from getting into the hands of those who shouldn't have easy access to them. This season is anything but merry.

And then it comes to the things in our own personal lives. It's hard to be joyful if we find ourselves fearful of losing our job and not being able to support ourselves. It's hard to be hopeful if we find ourselves anxious about our own health. And it's hard for us to believe in peace if we find ourselves struggling with divisions in our families which seem to continue year after year.

Let's face it, how can we as followers of Jesus Christ, untangle the strands of struggle in our lives from the strand of hope in the Advent season? And is it really possible to untangle the two?

You see, like Jesus's early disciples, we find ourselves not only struggling with the realistic realities in our own lives, but we also find ourselves caught up in our own fears and anxieties that prohibit us understanding the central message Jesus preaching in this text which also happens to be the fundamental core of our Christian faith.

For Jesus followers, it was the struggle living under an oppressive rule of the Roman empire which caused them to have difficulty understanding Jesus's message of hope. For us, it's the constant fears of terrorism, the realistic realities of systemic racism, and the disconnects we as Americans have from neighbors that make us fearful and not trust one another that makes it difficult for us to understand Jesus message of hope.

However, despite this realistic truth, we are guided, just as we are in the text from Luke, to look past the present and upon the hope which has been promised to us through Jesus Christ.

Last night I got back from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I like Pastor Dan, am originally from. While it was good to visit my family, I also found myself reminded how difficult the holiday season can be for my family—particularly my aunt and my uncle both of whom are in their late 50s.

It was about eight years ago that a few days before Christmas in 2007 that my mother, their sister, passed away from a short battle with cancer. And while my mother's death has been hard for myself and my sister, it's been hard to see how it affected my family, especially since through the grace of God, my family never dealt with grief before.

Right after my mother died, I can recall how her death affected my grandfather. My grandfather was not only the rock that held my family together but was the one who loved to share the joy of the Christmas season. Despite growing up as an orphan on the North Side of Pittsburgh during the great depression, my grandfather found in life what he always had wanted-- a family. And for him, it was life passion to give us the joy of the Christmas season to his children and us his grandchildren.

However, after my mother's death, this joy was taken from my grandfather. Like most men from that Great Depression/World War II generation, he never shared this pain with anyone. But the lack of joy he had in his life after her death and the hopelessness which he had from that was something we could feel the absence in him.

Shortly after my mother's death, my grandmother died. And shortly after that, my grandfather died. And the only ones left was my aunt and my uncle who like my grandfather, struggled to process the loss of their sister and their parents.

For the past several years, my aunt and uncle shared their dislike for the Christmas season because of its reminders of their loss in their lives. Yet while neither of them, of us, will ever get over the absence of lost loved ones, I saw for the first time last week my aunt and uncle not only process their grief through finally talking about my mother with my sister and I. But for the first time, they are seeming to find hope again as my cousins and I have made the effort to bring joy back into the holidays by creating new memories and traditions. For my aunt, uncle, and as well as my sister and I, these are our fig tree leaves, which with hope, will someday sprout a new season of Hope.

"Hope in God empowers us to enter in solidarity with the groaning creation and to persist in the struggle of the renewal of all things, writes theologian Daniel Miligore.

My friends, today is the first Sunday in Advent, a season that is supposed to be marked by joy, peace, and love not just in our world, but also in our lives. Yet all of us here understand this also can be a season of pain. A season which we are reminded of our families—but also the absence of loved ones. A season which we are reminded of peace—but reminded of the wars in the middle east and the wars even in our own streets right in our country. A season which we are reminded of joy—but a season which for many of us can be difficult to find when we find ourselves struggling in our health, in our jobs, in our relations, and in our lives.

Yet while it's not possible for us to untangle the difficulties of our lives and our world with the message of hope for this season of advent, we must remember that like all seasons, the pains we face now are only temporary—and that through Jesus Christ, we are promised deliverance from our pain, our struggles, and our fears, as our Jeremiah text calls us to do today, "4 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

"[Faith] sees in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, " writes theologian Jurgen Moltmann. "But the future of the very earth on which his cross stands. It sees in him the future of the very humanity for which he died. That is why it finds the cross the hope of the earth."

Keeping this hope, of course, is not easy. And while keeping this hope "in this season of waiting" is a struggle for us, we must look for the sprouting of fig trees in our lives when keeping this hope is a struggle.

Shortly after the Sandy Hook Shooting a few years ago before Christmas in 2012, a quote was spread on Facebook from another Pittsburgh, Fred Rogers. Mr. Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. The quote, which was based upon an interview he did in the 1980s, helped a lot of people keep hope during those difficult days in 2012 and the ones we go through now. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping," Fred Rogers

As we find ourselves beginning the journey of advent together, let us remember to keep the hope alive which as been promised to us.

And should you find yourselves overwhelmed by the struggles in your lives or that we are facing in their society, look for the helpers and look for those fig tree leaves in your lives. For it's through these helpers that we see sprouts of new life Which remind us that no matter the challenges of the night we face today in our lives and in our world, we will find hope in the morning.

Bibliography

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