

“At Last”

Sermon on Sunday, December 3, 2023

Dear church,

My theme this morning is from the title of one of my favorite advent hymns, “All earth is hopeful.” As soon as I typed these words, “All - Earth - Is - Hopeful” I felt funny and had to check in with myself. “Andreas, do you really believe this? Can you preach this?” In mean, let’s not kid ourselves, we don’t live in a time of great hopefulness and haven’t for many years. And the gospel reading that we just heard is not exactly spilling over with hopeful imagination either. “But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light...” This year we saw the sun darkened in the middle of bright summer days when a band of smoke from enormous Canadian wildfires traveled across the US border, illegally entering the United States, darkening the sky here in southern Pennsylvania. It felt as if those pine woods were burning next door. Do you remember those days from last summer? Can you call to mind the smell?

I remember coming to church for our Meditation exercises one Tuesday night in July and being greeted by the putrid stink of smoke. I remember wondering at the time, “Is there a fire nearby?” I had not noticed the usually reliable North Wales fire company sounding the alarm, yet the entire sky was hazy, and the air quality seriously compromised. Then it dawned on me, but I didn’t want to believe it... Could it be that this bad smell is from the wildfires we heard about in the news, those far-away blazes in Ontario and Nova Scotia? Well, we all know the answer now. And you know as much as I know, as much as we all know, that our world is interconnected. If this century of global crises teaches us anything it’s that we somehow belong together in this world, for better or worse. The destruction of rain forests thousands of miles away in the Amazon basin affects us, all of us, and knowing what happens down there, thousands of miles away, the ongoing destruction of the earth’s green lungs, doesn’t make us more hopeful, right? And what we do here in our country or fail to do, affects other parts of the world as well. The warnings of nature are calling us to repentance.

Still, my theme for this Sunday comes from a song that speaks of hope, capturing the essence of advent. We observe advent during the darkest season of the year because that’s when light and hope and a counter narrative to the evils and tortures and sins of the world are most important. “All earth is hopeful; the Savior comes at last.”

“At last,” is the key expression in this line. It may remind some of us of an Ella Fitzgerald song. “At last, my love has come along / My lonely days are over and life is like a song.” It’s a wonderful romantic song. I love it. Especially when Ella Fitzgerald sings it. But here, the same expression shows up in our advent song: the Savior comes AT LAST.

Earlier in this chapter of Mark, Jesus says, “The one who endures to the end will be saved.” (Mark 13:13). I was thinking about that verse this past week and it struck me how many challenges in life depend on us seeing them through to the end, not giving up too early, mustering the confidence that we will get through this. AT LAST!

If you are like me, a fragile human being, prone to the occasional mood swing, you will sometimes be tempted to quit when dark clouds roll around, metaphorically speaking. Now we are living in a time when people are tempted to quit this world, tempted to quit their faith, quit on the future, quit on values that have long sustained us in our society. And this song, this gospel of advent encourages us to be patient and hopeful in the face of all those disheartening challenges. The Savior comes AT LAST.

The song says that ALL Earth is hopeful. It’s hard to believe, given the human caused environmental crisis, but still true. We live in a century when ecology has moved from the domain of a few nature enthusiasts to the forefront of everybody’s minds. Even in the US, a country that has long gotten away with treating environmentalism as a radical cause of some tree huggers because we could get away with that attitude, because we are so ridiculously blessed with vast natural treasures that we never needed to pay too much attention to it. But now, we begin to understand that our place as children of God is embedded in the earth and enmeshed in the rhythms of all created life. That life rhythm, when you observe it, always instills hope. All earth is hopeful, whether it’s the large elm tree in my garden that sheds its leaves predictably every fall only to produce fresh green buds every spring, whether it’s the resilience of insects that disappear during the winter but magically show up as soon as it gets warmer or the migrant birds... Hope and resilience are baked into creation. All earth is hopeful, and we will be wise to learn from that. At Last!

The song and the gospel for this Sunday also speaks about a Savior. It’s an interesting term. Unless we are very religious and traditionally Christian, it may well cause skepticism. Because saviors always disappoint. Sooner or later, human saviors will let you down. But the gospels speak of a Savior with a capital “S,” and they identify him as Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, whose mode of salvation was not some world improvement program. Instead, he offered himself as a sacrifice. In dying and being raised to life again he became a different kind of savior and a spiritual guide to everyone, to save us. At Last.

He proved to us that the million ways in which we die to ourselves, whether through grief, pain, loss, or humiliation, can help us grow into the image of God in us. In fact, every Christian child who is baptized, whether as infant or as an adult, experiences death and resurrection symbolically because that’s how we grow as human beings, by dying to our “stuff.” That’s why we can be forever hopeful. That’s why the darkness and the gloom can’t scare us out of our wits. We know it’s part of the script and part of the prescription of life. So, have courage and live with hope, even now during these darker times, especially now.

And remember: At Last. At Last. Amen.