

2018 12 02 – Stories of Hope

Luke 21:25-36

Our theme for the Advent season is stories: stories of hope, stories of peace, stories of joy and stories of love. Each week I am going to ask someone from the congregation to share a brief story from their lives that illustrates the theme for that particular Sunday. This week I asked Melanie Davis to share her story during the Community Learning Time knowing that she would have the additional challenge of telling a story that was also appropriate for the children. But next week someone else, maybe even you, will be asked to share. So I invite you to think about the stories of your life and how they fit into the themes of Advent.

Of course, stories are not new to us. Every Sunday we read stories from the Bible and pray that we may be “open to the wisdom that we understand and hear.” This week our scripture passage is from the gospel of Luke. This is the same gospel that brings us the beautiful story of Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus that we read every year on Christmas Eve. But today’s story is not very Christmas-y is it?

The adult Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem and from his mouth is coming some distressing, even apocalyptic words. He says,

Signs will appear in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. The powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Yikes, that doesn't sound good at all, does it? It sounds as if the earth itself is in anguish. In fact the images in this story are incredibly similar to the violent storms that are already plaguing our earth as a result of climate change. It would be very easy to get really depressed and even morose about the fate of our planet. We could start to feel as if the world, as we know it, is coming to an end.

How many times in our lives have we felt that way? How many times have we been so sad, so lonely, so depressed, so sick, so poor, so discouraged that we felt as if our world was coming to an end? How many of us are in that place today, this morning? In times like this, in times when the world seems dark and foreboding where can we go to find hope? Where do we look to see a glimpse of the dawning light?

I think it's time for another story. This particular story was written by David Giuiliano. You may remember him as a former moderator of The United Church of Canada and he is also someone who is living with cancer. This year David published a book called, *It's Good to be Here: Stories We Tell About Cancer*. I'm actually in the middle of reading his book right now, but I bought an extra copy in case anyone wants to borrow it. Today I'm going to be reading a chapter that David calls, "Hope Changes Everything." These are his words.

Little children toss and turn in their beds. "How many sleeps?" they ask, until Christmas or their birthdays. Prisoners toss and turn on their narrow beds and count "get-ups" until the day of their release. I'm counting both sleeps and get-ups until Wednesday, when nine long weeks of radiation

treatments come to an end, and I am set free to recover from what is meant to cure me. Thursday feels sweet on the tongue because that is when I'll fly away, oh glory, home to Marathon.

Medically speaking, I am at my most depleted state. My head is saturated with the maximum allowable levels of radiation. My tongue is a dry brick. Food tastes of wood and tinfoil. My left ear is burned to the consistency of beef jerky; I imagine dogs slathering with Pavlovian longing when I pass by them. The eye adjacent to the chewy ear is pink and swollen, my vision fuzzy. My hair is a distant and wispy memory. And, I'm beginning to feel great – emotionally and even physically.

What has changed is that the object of my hope is near. The promise of what lies ahead is already transforming the present. I am experiencing what scholars of biblical Greek call the "aorist tense": something that is "already and not yet." That is the nature of the gospel promise: what we hope for, dream of, anticipate with certainty reaches back toward us from the future to transform the present.

My cancer pales in comparison to the great sufferings and hopes of this world. But today, I better understand how critical hope is for the transformation of the world. Hope radically changes not only the future, but also the present. It changes nothing, and it changes everything. Five more sleeps and four more get-ups, and I am feeling better than I should after being irradiated for nine weeks.

It's a cliché, and like all clichés it contains a kernel of truth. We say, "Where there is life there is hope." It is also true that, "Where there is hope there is life." www.davidgiuliano.ca Used with Permission.

David wrote, "That is the nature of the gospel promise: what we hope for, dream of, anticipate with certainty reaches toward us from the future to transform the present." I believe that this is what Jesus was talking about in the temple in Jerusalem. After his apocalyptic prediction, Jesus went on to say, "When these things happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your ransom is near at hand." That's sound more hopeful, doesn't it?

Let's begin by unpacking the word "ransom." It's always good to check other translations of the Bible. It turns out that the Greek word for ransom can also be translated as "redemption" or "salvation" and I know that these words also mean healing or transformation. So Jesus is saying that when our world seems to be falling apart, we are to be ready because some type of healing or transformation is near at hand. And that gives us reason to hope.

Jesus also talks about "the Chosen One coming on a cloud with great power and glory." We could interpret this line in lots of different ways. It could mean the second coming of Christ. It could just be a symbolic way of talking about the power of love appearing in the world. But thankfully we don't really have to wonder about that because Jesus explained what he meant using a parable, a story. He said,

Look at the fig tree, or any other tree. You see when they're budding and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things happening, know that the reign of God is near.

The reign of God: that time when peace and justice will come and the lion will sleep with the lamb, a time of health and wholeness in the world. Jesus is saying that the earth, and all that is in it, is not about to be annihilated, instead it, and we in it, are being transformed, renewed, healed, redeemed, saved.

So Jesus is saying that the reign of God is near. But he doesn't leave it there does he? Jesus says, "Be on your guard lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence, drunkenness and worldly cares." Jesus is telling us that the reign of God is coming, and we are a part of its creation. We have to be aware of what is happening and doing our part to heal ourselves and the world. As David Giuliano pointed out in his story, it is our hope, our actions in the world that are going to make the difference. He wrote: "That is the nature of the gospel promise: what we hope for, dream of, anticipate with certainty reaches toward us from the future to transform the present." The present is being transformed in and through us.

Where does our hope come from? We have hope because we believe that we are not alone. We believe in a God who is the essence of love. We believe in a loving force, a spirit, a connector beyond our understanding that is present in the universe and working through us and all creation to create and to recreate. That is our story; that is our hope.