

Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 27 November 2022, First Sunday in Advent

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Sermon starts: 26:25

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5 • Psalm 122 • Romans 13:11-14 • Matthew 24:36-44

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDhjvi4BCSU&t=1010s>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Today we lit the candle for hope. What is this thing, hope? I live on Hopesmore Drive, and when people ask me how to spell it, I say, well as in ‘he hopes for more money. If I'm wearing my clerical collar I might say, well, as in ‘he hopes for more people in church’. But joking aside, what is this hope thing? The scriptures we read, this whole Bible, emerged over centuries as a document of hope. From the creation story in the beginning, when the Creator looks at everything and pronounces it, “Good, very good,” to the very end in Revelation where we have the promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth, where all tears will be wiped away, the whole Judeo-Christian story is a story of hope.

This is a good creation. We have a loving and just Creator who cares about us, and the mission statement of our God is love and reconciliation, restoration and forgiveness, healing and peace. Those grand themes of hope are the major key in which the music of scriptures is set.

But what is hope? When I was 13 years old, a good number of my friends started showing up at school with an amazing piece of technology: it was called a portable transistor radio. I had known only two radios prior to that time: one was in a large heavy wooden case, sitting in the living room, with big knobs to control it. Definitely not portable. The other radio was a crystal radio kit my uncle gave me, which I had to assemble and had one earphone, and if I got the little wire in the right place I could listen to CKDA. After talking to my parents and catching a few of those glances between them that they thought were secret, I began to hope. Oh, how I hoped, for months, even telling some of my friends that I thought I would be getting a transistor radio for my birthday. That's what hope is like - you can picture it, you can feel it, you can describe it, and you dare to express it to others. Now, a young teen hoping for a certain item is a very trivial illustration, if we compare that with the hope of the Christian for the return of Jesus, when everything will get sorted out, all the evil will be put away, and all that is good and right will be lifted up, the love of God will finally cast out all fear. Our hope for the trinkets of modern life is nothing compared to the hope people enter when they're diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. I wonder how I would preach about hope in Ukraine right now. There's never been such a deep and desperate hope shared so widely in the human community as the hope we all hold for the curbing of global warming and a survivable world for our descendants. And just about every hope you can identify has an opposite side: a dread. What if the chemo doesn't work? What if Putin pushes the nuclear button? What if? What if?

Something else we notice about hope is that it engages us in a timeline. There might be a known deadline: the draw for a door prize (that hope for me is always a waste of time); that might be test results from a biopsy, the posting of university exam results. I remember lining up, those big things posted on the wall. But for many things, hope has an unknown timeline: a young person hoping to meet and fall in love with a life partner – when will it happen? A congregation hoping for renewal in attendance - when will it happen? The interim priest in charge, hoping for a new minister to come - when will it happen? The Christian wondering when the Lord Jesus will finally appear - when will it happen? To this latter question Jesus had a very clear answer: you don't know. He didn't know. The angels in heaven don't know, even. Only the Father really knows when that'll happen.

Hope always raises another issue: how do we behave while we're hoping for something that has no discernible deadline, no target date? When we had small children living at home and we lived mostly up Island for most of our lives, we had to drive to Victoria to take the children to see their grandparents. When will you be arriving? was my mother's inevitable question. - Oh, we should be there about 4 30. Of course, that would be the day one of the kids would lose a shoe, the car battery would be flat, and there were the inevitable unscheduled bathroom stops. This of course was before cell phones, so we would arrive late. What were our parents to do? At the very least they had to keep awake, keep things at the ready. They hoped until they actually saw us. I think one of the things my mother did with her extra waiting time was to plan her subtle comments about how I could not keep a schedule. And we won't mention the three-year-old in the back of the car: “When will we get there? I'm bored!”

The Advent season reminds us that the Christian life is about waiting and hoping and not knowing the time, and therefore having to figure out what to do while we're waiting. Paul had some good advice: he said, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Once I got my radio, I didn't need hope anymore, but it took a lot of patience. And I would remind you again, the patient waiting hope of Advent is for the return of the Risen Jesus, not for the Christmas tree and the birth of the baby Jesus and the family party. I'm afraid Advent has been hijacked by our retail industry, and it's become Christmas preparation, not preparation for the second coming. But keeping awake and ready: that is the first step.

Paul's letter to the Romans offers other rich instruction about what to do while we're waiting: “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us live honourably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.” This lifestyle of waiting puts aside self-centeredness, says no to self-indulgence and yes to honesty and integrity and care. It's a lifestyle that is to be as much part of us as our clothing: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Put Jesus on like a cloak - but isn't he the one we're waiting for? How can we put on the one who hasn't yet come? Here we find once again that we are trying to understand the timeless divine Creator, who lives above and outside time and the ticking clock, with a mind that is completely bound by the clock. In talking of the second coming, we often talk about “the already and the not yet”, for Jesus himself said, “the Kingdom of Heaven is already here.” Yet we look around our world and we know that it is not yet fully in place.

How can we put on Christ, the one who claims to be here with us, and yet is one day coming in some different fullness? I believe that at one level, when we Christians put on Christ for whose return we hope and wait, that in that instant he has come. When we live the Jesus lifestyle of selfless love, that Jesus is here. When we fulfill the law of God, and Paul says, “Love does no wrong to the neighbour,”, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. When we put on the love of Christ for whom we wait, then Christ has come. Loving our neighbour as ourselves: there is nothing we hope for more simply or more deeply than that.

As Advent begins and we're called to waiting and hoping, we can be sure of our future with Christ as we put on Christ and live the life of loving our neighbour as ourselves. And so we say, Maranatha, Lord Jesus, come soon. I invite you to that Advent greeting: *Maranatha, Lord Jesus, come soon*. Amen.