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Sermon – Luke 21:25-36
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For Advent this year I want to set the stage for Jesus' birth and highlight for us the context into which Jesus was born 2000 years ago and what he is born into today. This week we're talking about Biblical prophets, and the messages and visions they received about the promises of God; next week we will hear about the political tensions in Israel prior to Jesus' birth; then John the Baptist and his role in preparing the way of the Lord. On the 4th Sunday we will spend time with Mary, the woman who said yes to God. And through it all we will prepare ourselves to receive the gifts of this season. Let us pray . . .

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I had a very full and wonderful time away the last few weeks – many thanks to Susan, Mona and Jim for leading worship in my absence. My whole immediate family gathered for American Thanksgiving, including my nephews and their significant others – you know how unpredictable the schedules of young people can be! I had a moment during dinner where I realized the generations had advanced a step. It seems like just yesterday I was 20 years old, bringing my boyfriend to Thanksgiving, and talking to my aunts about all the interesting things happening in my life. Now I'm aunt to two amazing young adults, who are always good for interesting conversation . . . for instance, the shooting of Abraham Lincoln and how the trial of those accused helped shape our country; we covered LGBTQ rights, and what it would be like to experience the apocalypse. The apocalypse . . . I love this kind of stuff, and you know, the apocalypse is often misunderstood, so I said to them, “did you know that the apocalypse is not about the end of the world?” Immediately I had their attention. Apocalypse actually means revelation, like the last book of the Bible; a revelation is communication from the world beyond the physical. Sometimes these communications come from God or messengers (angels), or God shows us dreams and visions. Even in eschatology, the study of the end times, it is not about the end of the world . . . it's about the end of the world as we know it, like with the dawn of the technological age . . . yeah, we're not going back. The song was in my head all week . . . “It's the end of the world as we know it; it's

the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.” Well, maybe not fine, but confident the sun will rise tomorrow and I will get up and have a cup of tea while reading the news on my smart phone.

The confusion in the meaning of apocalypse is understandable, because much of apocalyptic literature contains wild images of forces of nature rising up into chaos. These revelations do often relate to the end times, as they are often precipitated by historic events, but remember the meaning of the word revelation or apocalypse itself is more like “communication” – perhaps there would be less confusion if the communication took on a more straightforward form. Take this morning’s text from Luke for instance, who is writing after the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed . . . the first line reads: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.” These words echo no fewer than 3 different Old Testament or Hebrew prophets; in their time, these prophets heard the message that in the sun, moon and stars there would be signs of God’s coming action. Two of the prophets, Joel and Isaiah heard specific messages about chaos in nature announcing the Day of the Lord, that is, the day God judges the nations and delivers people from evil. This is news to many of us, but Jesus’ followers can hear the echo of the prophets as Jesus speaks . . . as he continues, they hear the prophet Daniel: “As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” Jesus refers to Daniel’s vision to bring it into context with his own identity and role in the world. In doing so Jesus reveals himself as the one who will fulfill the scripture . . . one day.

But, can you imagine receiving images like the ones we’ve heard this morning? It’s just not a common occurrence for most of us to receive revelations from the non-physical world. It does happen to us; it’s happened to me and to many of you, but for us it’s something we process and wonder about and perhaps even share with someone we trust. But for a prophet it’s more of a way of life – speaking as one who lives with a prophet. It’s a unique human experience; whether one receives auditory messages,

visions, dreams, intuitive knowing, body sensations, messages can consume the individual. And messengers don't much care what prophets have on their agenda for the day – messages come when they come. And this way of life can be further isolating, because these messages are received on behalf of the community in which the prophets live, and they're not easy messages: they're meant to move the culture along, upset the status quo, to help them remember God and understand God's call for them, making the prophet unpopular, to say the least. Even when the prophet brings messages of hope, there is no set timeline for when God will act, so prophets, in particular, live in the tension of reality and God's promise of faithfulness. They live in the tension of hope . . .

This week in our Advent study on Wednesday afternoon, we learned a Hebrew Qavah. Qavah word for hope, comes from the Hebrew word Qav, which means chord. A chord can be pulled tight, creating tension and waiting for release, which is the essence of Qavah: waiting in a state of tension for release. You see Biblical hope is not based on current circumstances or any indication that things are going to get better; it is not optimism or fantasy, it is not nostalgia for a better time. Instead Biblical hope is based on the character and faithfulness of God – it is God we are waiting for, not for circumstances to improve. This hope is the substance of Advent: living in the tension of our current circumstances while waiting for God to come and fulfill what God has promised. Being in that tension, living in that tension and not pushing it away for something more heart-warming, is the experience of hope. What is on the other side of that tension for you? What is the thing in the world or in your life that, while you see no evidence will improve, you long for God to transform?

Since the day Jesus shared the news of his own return, people have been trying to read the signs and figure out when it will happen – apparently millions of predictions have been made over the years. As I consider the times we are living in, I have a lot of compassion for those who were just sure they had it right, because I'm seeing plenty of signs around us. Hurricanes, tsunamis, unimaginable forest fires . . . nations are fighting and allies are not as secure as they once were . . . all we need now is the sun to turn dark and the moon to turn to blood. I wonder . . . will Daniel's dream come true? Will Jesus come in a

cloud with power and glory? Or is his coming more gradual, like the growing and expanding Kingdom of God through the collaboration of God with the body of Christ? Jesus is not entirely clear about when the day will come, but he says, surely as the leaves of the fig tree indicate the coming spring, these signs indicate the coming of the Son of Man. Just as the fig tree will become full of buds as the season changes, the coming of the Son of Man is inevitable.

In the midst of the long game of waiting for Jesus, we are invited to enter this season each year in a state and posture of hope. We hope – we wait in a state of tension and expectation – for God’s love to be born in the world. Jeremiah says there is still life in the ancestral line of David: “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. In 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 . . .” and in all lands. Let us join with the prophets and Qavah for God, let us hope for God, because we know God is faithful. Thanks be to God.