

“Stand Up and Lift Your Head”  
Advent I, November 28, 2021  
Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Things seem a little backward today. Our readings are in a sort of role reversal. We’re used to hearing a word of doom from the prophets, warnings about how bad things will get. And the gospels can usually be counted on for a word of consolation and comfort. But today Jeremiah offers renewal and restoration, while Luke gives us warnings and predictions of destruction.

But both readings, I think, are interested in one thing; they’re both trying to convey hope. In Jeremiah’s case, his people are languishing in exile and wondering if life will ever be the same. They’re despairing of ever returning home and having their identity restored. He gives them a word of hope, a promise that in time God will establish a new monarchy from the line of David and restore Israel to her former glory and better. The past won’t be repeated because Israel will be ruled with justice and righteousness. The poor will be cared for in the ways God intends and they’ll never again be estranged from God.

The hope in Jesus’ words might be a little harder to detect. It’s easy to get overwhelmed by the images of destruction, sounds of distress, people fainting from fear and foreboding. None of it sounds very hopeful, granted. But in the midst of all that turmoil, we’re told to assume a posture that leads to hope. We’re told to stand up and lift our heads. We’re told to face these portents of destruction with courage. While others are fainting from fear, cowering in the face of change, we are told to stand firm in the values we’ve been taught. While God will establish justice and righteousness for Jeremiah’s people, followers of Jesus are told to hold fast to those qualities, and more, in the face of adversity. In the first, the people’s hope is put in God; in the second, God’s hope is put in us.

Advent is the season for taking stock of ourselves and the world in which we live to be sure we’re still up to the challenge. There are always going to be threats on the horizon. We’ll always be faced with resistance to living with justice and compassion. And it’s tempting to hide ourselves away, to put our heads in the sand and just let the world run off the rails. But what scripture teaches us over and over, from Jeremiah to Jesus, is we’re meant for more than destruction and fighting. We’re meant for more than fear and foreboding. We’re meant for justice and compassion, for joy and love.

Hanging on to those qualities while so many around us disparage them as naïve or foolish, while leaders sow division and capitalize on our fears, is the hardest thing we’re called to do as people of faith. How do we stand up and lift our heads when so many forces in this world are beating us down?

I look for inspiration in the lives of others who have overcome. I’ve recently started reading the book *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones. It’s based on the series of articles

she wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* that won her the Pulitzer Prize. She and her team have gathered essays and poems and pictures to tell the story of Black people in America from the time the first ship arrived carrying enslaved Africans to the shores of the Virginia colony in 1619. It is a story of torture and humiliation and sorrow. One that many white people, those of us who have benefited from that misery, don't want to hear or even think about. If there are any people with no reason to hope, it's Black people in America.

Hannah-Jones opens the book with the essay she published in 2019 titled simply, "Democracy." She describes the American flag her father flew in their front yard. She says no matter what condition the house fell into, with chipped paint or an occasional broken fence "that flag always flew pristine." She goes on to express her wonderment at this: "So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this Black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused Black Americans, the way it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner?" It's a fair question, and one she spends the essay exploring as she recounts the struggle of Black people in our country through long years of enslavement, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. In the end, she writes, "No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it...The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of Black resistance and visions for equality. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but Black people did...For generations we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best."

That's the hope we're called to embrace and to work toward. We cannot give up on the justice and compassion proclaimed by the prophets and revealed in Jesus, even when all the evidence points against it. We must stand up and lift our heads so we can pursue justice and live with compassion no matter how far this world sinks into violence and despair. In a world wracked by division and fear what we're called to bring is needed more than ever. So, we cannot give up. God calls us to hope against hope, to look at ourselves and our world fearlessly and honestly and become God's own instruments of hope for the world.

Amen