



First United Church of Oak Park

Do Not Be Afraid: Have Hope

Luke 2: 8-15

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

November 29, 2020

We are beginning an Advent series this morning called Do Not Be Afraid. There is so much to be afraid of right now, but we are going to address our fears through the stories we tell in Advent and through the themes of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love. So today we begin with hope.

The first week of Advent is always dedicated to hope. This year hardly seems like the time for shallow optimism, positive thinking, or trite sayings.

We don't have time for shallow optimism. Shallow optimism said, "We'll beat this virus by Easter," and meanwhile *did* nothing. Look where that got us.

We don't have time for positive thinking. Positive thinking says that if we would just ignore systems of injustice and gaze blissfully at our own navels, we would be happy; never mind those dying across town.

We don't have time for trite sayings, either. Try saying "everything happens for a reason" or "the sun will come up again tomorrow no matter who's in charge" to someone who has lost a family member and who knows good and well the reason for their grief is that we, as a people, have failed to do what is right.

This is an Advent like none we've ever known. People are sick. People are dying. We are not sitting in the sanctuary singing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" together in one voice. It feels scary. It feels hopeless. It's a fear and a sense of despair that doesn't respond to shallow optimism or positive thinking or trite sayings.

What does hope even look like in Advent 2020?

You may remember that this story we heard today took place during the time of Caesar Augustus. Every Christmas we hear the words that come right before the story of the angels and shepherds, "a decree went out from Emperor Augustus." Why is that important? Well, Augustus was a savvy politician. He put out a great deal of propaganda. He wrote about himself as the "bringer of peace." He titled his own autobiography, "The Deeds of the Divine Augustus." He called himself an emperor "for all people." But for many people, he was anything but a divine bringer of peace for all people. The ancient reader would hear in the decree given by the angels a clear echo of a decree from Augustus ... good news of great joy for all people ... a savior ... peace among those he favors.

The angels bring a message of hope, but also a dig at the current state of the world. It is a reminder to not be afraid, but it acknowledges the great power of the

Roman Empire that is ever threatening. It offers peace, but a kind of peace unlike the one offered by the current leader.

The angel's decree offers hope, but not an unrealistic hope: a reason to not be afraid, but not a denial of the scary things happening in the world.

The angels' decree would have reminded the shepherds of all that is happening in Rome with the one who calls himself the divine bringer of peace, but called them to go instead to Bethlehem, to see, not a robed emperor, but a poor baby, wrapped in cloth, not sitting on a throne, but lying in a feed trough. And the shepherds responded to the decree, "Let us go now to Bethlehem to see this thing the true Lord, not Lord Caesar, but the Lord God, the true divine one, told us about." The angels offered hope that would not come from a bigger army or a stronger Rome, but from baby born in a barn who will offer peace with justice and call the last first and the first last, who will heal what is broken and make right what is wrong, and who will call on all of us to do the same. That is what hope looked like as they prepared for that first Christmas. Realistic, active, and full of joy.

What does it look like now, in this very strange Advent 2020? Very much the same, I think.

It looks like the followers of that baby born in a manger pointing to what those in power would call "peace" and saying that is not peace ... that's just a quiet absence of justice. Peace is over here ... it can be found in the justice Jesus showed.

It looks like the followers of that baby born in a manger pointing to what those in power would call "joy" and saying that is not joy ... that is looking out for number one and ignoring the suffering of others. Joy can be found over here in a life lived in service.

It looks like followers of that baby born in a manger pointing to what those in power would call "love" and saying that is not love ... that is manipulation and propaganda. Love can be found over here on the margins with the least of these, where Jesus spent his time loving those others had shut out.

It looks like followers of that baby born in a manger pointing to what those in power would call "hope" and saying that is not hope ... that is shallow optimism, positive thinking, and trite sayings that ignore the realities our neighbors are facing. Hope ... hope can be found here, in that baby in the manger, and in you and me.

This hope looks less like a wish, a dream, a concept, and more like a verb ... like "go!" It looks like going from the world we know toward the kind of world God wants. This hope is as realistic, as active, and as joyful as the shepherds' hope that first Christmas, which caused them to say, "let us go now ... to Bethlehem ... and see this thing that has taken place, which the true divine one has told us about." Amen.