BIBLE READINGS: Jeremiah 33:14-16 Luke 21:25-36

SERMON

We often see what we want to see. Abraham Maslow is credited with coining the phrase, "If all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail." Another psychologist, Aaron Beck, realised that looking for negative things can be a contributing factor to depression. He noticed that many of his clients had ingrained destructive thought patterns nearly worn into their brains, like ruts in a muddy road. We can hit a state where we feel so beaten down by life, that the brain no longer registers hope.

Depression acts like a filter that only lets in negativity, failure and criticism, while stopping compliments, positive feedback and hope at the border of consciousness. Depression is like a drought of hope. Beck's life work was the creation of cognitive behavioural psychology, trying to find the ways through the filters, ingrained thoughts, the ways that we feel habitually beaten down, so that hope can still spring in the mind and soul. We all need to have a candle of hope lit somewhere in our soul.

One of the ancient signs of hope is the fruitfulness of fig trees. Fig trees are right there in the beginning of the Bible, when Adam and Eve suddenly discover they are naked, after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they cover themselves in fig leaves. This is probably symbolic. Fig trees can live hundreds of years and are some of the oldest living things on the planet. Rabbis often studied Torah on the cool shelter of fig trees, and the tree was associated with a quiet place to seek wisdom.

The fruit of the fig tree is often symbolic of blessings and prosperity in the scriptures. Many times the Old Testament prophets spoke of the hope of grape vines and fig trees. If they saw trouble on the horizon, they spoke of fig trees being cut down by their enemies. Eating figs in the shade of the tree is the good life.

Jesus speaks of fig trees three times in Luke's Gospel. In each case he spoke of the importance of tending the fig tree, and being patient for its fruit to come, and working towards bearing fruit in our own actions. In Luke 13, he tells a parable of a man who is contemplating cutting down his fig tree because it has not given fruit for three years. He is persuaded to wait one more year, fertilize and tend it, but after that he is not going to keep a barren tree wasting the soil. Here the message is that God will be patient with us and tend us till we bear fruit, but hopefully we will get around to it and not just waste our space on earth. This would have been perceived as practical wisdom by his audience, since fig trees often took two to five years to bear decent fruit. The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus, born 20 years after Jesus, said, *"No great thing is created suddenly, any more than a bunch of grapes or a fig. If you tell me that you desire a fig, I answer you that there must be time. Let it first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen."*

In today's parable, Jesus uses the fig tree to note that we also must be patient with the work of God. The rest for our souls and peace in the world we long for does not always come quickly. So we have to be watchful, paying attention to the signs of hope in our midst. Jesus says, *"Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that the kingdom of God is near."*

Jesus gives us some advice on how to be hopeful through tough times. Jesus points out that there will be times when "people faint with fear and for what is coming upon the world.*"In those times Jesus promises to come to us, so "when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."* To me, that sounds like the opposite of what we do in times of trouble. Most often when there is conflict, confusion, hardship or threats to us, we hunker down and wait for it to pass. That doesn't naturally

seem like a time to raise your head. Jesus' words are challenging us to get involved. When others faint with fear, we are called to lift our heads and look for the signs of God's presence.

Jesus also councils us to not get caught up either in wine or worry Don't fall into the trap of sedating ourselves in times of trouble (and in our times we have so many ways to anaesthetise our fears with medication, TV and addictions of all kinds), nor are we to give in to the temptation of constant worry. Worry stifles hope.
It keeps us looking for trouble rather than being vigilant for the signs that God is near.

Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders were Presbyterian mission workers in Palestine. For several years they quietly ministered to a small Christian population in the occupied West Bank village Zababdeh. Amidst the mortar attacks, midnight raids by Israeli soldiers, the deaths of people they love, these missionaries tried to offer a God's-eye view of all this tragedy - a vision that offered healing and hope amidst all the hostility.

Now in the Middle East, Easter is celebrated in a particular way. The tradition is that on Holy Saturday--the day before the Orthodox Easter, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch enters the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. After a moment of prayer, he emerges with the holy fire, which he then passes on to the faithful. From there, with shouts of "Christ is risen!" the flame is spread to the churches all over Israel and Palestine.

Unfortunately, because of the tight occupation that gripped most of Palestine, this ritual proved to be almost impossible for the Palestinian Christians from the West Bank because they simply could not get through the Israeli military checkpoints. So Marthame Sanders decided to make the impossible possible. He borrowed a car from the Catholics, some lanterns from the Orthodox Christians, a robe from an Anglican priest. And then he started out early on Holy Saturday morning to go and get the light. Immediately, he was stopped and threatened at one of the checkpoints. But though he was verbally harassed, because he was an American, he was allowed to pass.

He rushed to Jerusalem, getting there in time to receive the holy fire from the Patriarch. Now the trick was to get the flame back home through all those checkpoints before the fire went out. Late at night, he once again entered that tricky checkpoint, and this time he was stopped with an M-16 nervously waving in his face. His baggage was searched. The gas tank, the trunk, and the steering wheel were taken apart. But, finally, blessedly, he was let through. When he arrived back home, he was greeted by a large crowd, and so at midnight, this joyful throng of resurrected people travelled from church to church, bringing the light of Christ to the Orthodox, the Melkite, the Catholic, and the Anglican communities.

Marthame's reflections on that day are the very heart of this day's Gospel lesson - the good news that hope is always stronger than despair when life is seen from a God's-eye point of view.

He wrote, "Everyone agreed that the arrival of the Holy Fire this year paled in comparison to the celebrations of brighter days, but it was the biggest event in years. The days are still dark here. The economy is destroyed. The roads are closed. The army comes to town far too frequently. But for a brief moment, the Christians in the northern West Bank were reconnected with the miracle of Christ -the miracle of incarnation, the miracle of hope."

It is Advent, and time to be vigilant and watchful for a light shining in the darkness. We have lit our own candle of hope this morning, and during the coming week it is our job to protect and nourish the flame. Sometimes we must be patient with God, like waiting three or four years for the fig tree to bear fruit. Wishing for quick fixes is not true hope. The wound or the problem are still there underneath. Hope seeks true healing, lasting fixes, real change in our

lives. Hope is like planting and tending a fig tree, paying attention and being patient that we may reap a lifetime of good fruit.

How will you live into God's hope this Advent season?