

*The Posture of Hope*

Advent I, November 29, 2015

Luke 21.25-28

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

**Luke 21.25-28**

“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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the power of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Human One coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

*The Posture of Hope*

*Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.*

Be ready. Be prepared, this old African-American spiritual tells us, because “the time is drawing nigh.”

The folks at Morehouse College tell us that this spiritual is both “biblical and subversive.” And frankly, if it’s biblical, it probably is, by definition, subversive.

The song is subversive because it’s about slaves communicating with one another to always be ready to escape. Keep those lamps trimmed and burning because the time is coming when you can slip away under the cover of darkness into that promise of freedom.

It’s lovely and catchy but it’s more than that. It’s the music of resistance. It’s a simple act of hope that intends to undermine the whole system of slavery. It’s subversive.

And it’s biblical because it refers to that story in Matthew 25 about the 10 bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom -- 5 take enough oil and 5 run out. The moral of the story is “Keep awake because you don’t know the day or the hour when that promised one will come.”

That story is also one of the parables that precedes the description Jesus gives of the final realization of the kingdom of God when all the nations are gathered together.

Those who are invited into eternal blessing are the ones who have fed the hungry and clothed the naked and welcomed the stranger and visited those in prison. Because, he says, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, in other words, because you never know when the coming of God's kingdom will present itself as the simple act of feeding hungry people or clothing naked ones or welcoming strangers or visiting prisoners.

That's biblical.

And it is also subversive because maybe it undermines some of our grand ideas about what the Gospel – the good news – must mean. What if it really is as simple as being ready to recognize Jesus in the needs of one another? Didn't Jesus begin his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of God is upon me to preach good news to the poor; to bring sight to the blind; to recover those who are lost; to bring freedom to captives; and to declare that this year – right now in this place – is when and where God's justice and grace begins"?

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning because you never know when that Jesus is going to show up.

But there is another reference for this song in a companion to our text from Luke 21 for today. It's Luke 12 and it's a parable specifically about slaves and masters. The master could return at any time for his wedding banquet so, the story says, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit."

And then the story makes this odd shift to being ready because you don't know when a thief might break in. "You must also be ready, because the Human One – or the Son of Man, this Bearer of the Promise – is coming at an unexpected hour."

How's that for something subversive? The promise, as one commentator says, is that the One who is coming comes not like a sweet little innocent baby but like a thief who breaks into your house and steals your stuff – a gracious thief, perhaps, but a thief nonetheless who robs you of that stuff you find so hard to part with but that keeps you weighed down and trapped and enslaved. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, not because being prepared means you can prevent it from happening, but so that, when it does happen, you may be lucky enough to see the liberation it can bring and you will know what it means to be free.

I'd say that is pretty subversive in this season that seduces us into speeding up and consuming more.

What if, as our video says, we prepare for the coming of the promise, not with more, but with less – hurrying less and eating less and buying less and worrying less?

Let's be honest. That seems almost impossible. That's pretty hard to do when everything within us and everything around us resists the most simple gifts of this season.

Maybe it takes a thief to break in steal all the other stuff.

I was thinking this week of one of my best Christmas Eve's ever. It was over 25 years ago in Chicago and it came, literally, "upon a midnight clear." It came after the loss of a long-term relationship so all those traditions we had created together were gone. It was after what felt like a failed ministry had come to an end I had to take a job that I didn't like very much – a job that required me to work on the day after Christmas so there was no going home.

Early that day, my roommate went home to his family and that left me all alone in our sparse little apartment on Christmas Eve.

Sitting around feeling sorry for myself was not really what that night called for so I walked over to the little stone Episcopal church for the midnight service. At least the music would be good, I thought. It was ok. What was better was being surrounded by all different kinds of people singing the old carols together and the quiet intimacy of lighting candles with complete strangers.

When I left the service at midnight, with the church bells ringing behind me and snow falling all around me, and my normally rowdy neighborhood so peaceful, I found myself feeling hope like I never had before -- not because I imagined another relationship or another ministry or a different job. If those were possibilities, they were lost in the dark somewhere ahead of me.

Hope was something less specific. It was that all the disappointments and brokenness in my life and in the world could somehow be redeemed – that relatively simple acts could save us from giving up on the world and each other and ourselves.

Keep those lamps trimmed and burning because you never know when the opportunity of the kingdom of God is going to present itself in a simple act of meeting someone's need.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning because you never know when the loss of something you love will turn out to be your liberation.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning because the world can be a dark place – a place where all the signs point to confusion and fear and a sense of dread – but if you keep those lamps lit, you might begin to see those little glimmers of hope.

And hope is one of the most subversive acts of all.

It is, as the text for today says, not just a feeling. It's a posture.

The world can be dark and disappointing and full of dread. But if your reaction is to duck and run for cover or to slink away in shame, there is no hope.

“Stand up and raise your heads,” Jesus says, because that's when redemption – liberation – is on its way.

And it starts, as Pastor Ned said last week, with the simple act of showing up.

I found hope that Christmas Eve all those years ago because I just showed up at that church. I didn't expect much but what I found was hope.

And I know it's easy to think that other people should show up for us. It is fed by that consumer mentality that all the world is here just waiting to serve us. And it breeds disappointment when it doesn't. There's nothing hopeful about that.

The posture of hope is for us to show up – even when things look dark and you don't have any clue if being there will make a difference.

Howard Zinn wrote an article called “The Optimism of Uncertainty” and he says: *Who foresaw that, on that day in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to move from the front of the bus, this would lead to a mass protest of black working people, and a chain of events that would shake the nation, startle the world, and transform the South?*

Rosa Parks was practicing the posture of hope that day. It was a simple act of showing up and positioning herself in such a way that a whole generation was inspired not to give up on the world and each other and themselves.

And it's not too late for us. It's not too late to practice the posture of hope. You have already showed up. All you have to do now is to stand up, raise your heads, and sing.

And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The interview with folks from Morehouse about the meaning of African-American Spirituals can be found online at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org). Look for African-American Spirituals/May 4, 2012/Religion & Ethics News Weekly/PBS. The article by Howard Zinn, "The Optimism of Uncertainty" is a chapter in Paul Rogat Loeb's *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: a citizen's guide to hope in a time of fear* (Basic Books, 2004), pp.64-65.