

Little Hopes and Big Hope

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on the First Sunday of Advent, (29 Nov), 2009.

Text: Luke 21:33

“Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away.” ~Jesus

Lesslie Newbigin, a Scottish missionary who became a Bishop of the Church of South India, in 1952 presided at a theological commission in Bossey Switzerland for the World Council of Churches. It was a very high-powered meeting, with some theological giants in attendance: Karl Barth, D.T. Niles, Emil Brunner, among others. Bishop Newbigin wrote a letter to his wife back in India about how difficult it was to keep these luminaries on task. “They are all exceptionally able people with gleams of vision and favourite theories all of their own, and they are all accustomed to being listened to and not contradicted, but it is very hard to get them to stick to a certain line of thought.” After leading a communion service with Karl Barth as the inspiring preacher he was, Newbigin wrote in his diary: “The theme of the Commission is a challenge not to let the great hope of God’s Kingdom be crowded out by little hopes.”¹

So it is for us as well. There are so many little hopes crowding our lives, our time, our efforts. That is one reason why in Advent each year we get grand apocalyptic texts of Jesus teaching us about the coming Kingdom, an Event not just for us but for the whole cosmos. It is easy to be distracted and think the real issue is how we will spend Christmas and what we will purchase as gifts for family members. Or how much we will contribute to a good cause at year end or how much our bonus will be. There is something much larger that we all must face.

This came back to me with force earlier in the year during my double hospitalizations, particularly the first night I spent at Mountainside. I did not know it at the time, nor did I have time to fret about it. But I was very close to an exit that night. As Dr. Johnson used to say, “A hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind.” It puts a lot of things in perspective and imparts wisdom about the big picture. Were this to be your and my last day and were it to come ‘*like a thief in the night*,’² would we be ready? This is the great question about the big hope of our faith. It is not about the little hopes that crowd and press us in everyday ways. What about the big hope and our place in it?

I heard not long ago that John B. Coburn died this past August. A number of years ago, I heard Bishop Coburn, at one time the Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts, give some lectures at Yale. I saved my notes from those talks and this week found them in my Advent sermon file. It was over twenty years ago he gave these lectures to people like me,³ busy preachers, professional Christians. While we all came prepared to hear advice on how to be better at preaching, the Bishop surprised us. There were no speeches about technique, no prescriptions for improving our communication skills. Instead he spoke of prayer and prayer’s signal importance to

¹ Newbigin, Lesslie. *Unfinished Agenda*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 139.

² 1Thessalonians 5:2.

³ The Beecher Lectures at Yale, February, 1988.

preachers. He told us that the purpose of prayer is to enable us to see more clearly the evidences of grace in our world. Coburn told us prayer does not help us get ‘more grace.’ Grace is never a result of our efforts. Grace does not belong to us—we cannot possess grace. Rather, we belong to it. And prayer is our means of opening ourselves to grace. This may be another way of saying prayer keeps the little hopes from crowding out the big hope.

He advised us to pray as we can—not as we think we should. Be quiet, he said. Just sit. Wait. Enter a quiet place in your heart, taking time to be patient and willing to do nothing. This is the first lesson of praying: not to do anything or try to control things. The Bishop said, “Just let what happens, happen.” And here was his second lesson on prayer: We learn through prayer to accept ourselves in our present situation as having reality in God’s will. He told us that the acceptance of ourselves and God as intertwined is a prerequisite of prayer. It means we accept who we are, we accept our pasts, we accept our parents, we accept disappointments, *everything* in our lives in light of God’s will. That is a big order, worthy of a big hope. It takes time and openness to God through prayer.

Then, he told us, only then to turn to our Sunday scripture text. First read it in silence, then read it in prayer. Our sermons should be a response to God’s initiative in the text of Scripture. Trust in this fact is, he said, the key to good preaching. “Don’t think your congregations cannot tell when a preacher’s words come out of the Bible read in prayer!” Scripture is addressed to a person, not to a political issue, not to a movement or an institution. The words in the testaments are addressed first to the preacher and through him or her, to you. The text has to speak to the preacher before it can speak to the congregation. God is *always* the speaker—in both cases. We cannot press ourselves and our style too hard. We have to be willing to let God have a say. To hear the words first ourselves means we have been touched by them, changed by them. This is central in sermons which impart life to hearers. As Thomas Carlyle once said, “*We are looking for a preacher who knows God otherwise than by hearsay.*”

Christ’s purpose is to change our natures into his nature. This is the big hope, so often crowded out by all the little hopes of modern life. One of the things you can feel in the music of Jacques Berthier and Taizé, is this willingness to be still and wait. It is simple in a good sense. It is about waiting for God to have a say. In singing the words of the Bible, the music lets the Word be the instrument through which God speaks to us. As we quietly hum or sing the chant, we listen and hope for a Voice to challenge all the little distractions clanging for attention in our lives. And perhaps to give us a new perspective on what they mean and what the big hope in Jesus is. A great place to be.

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees; as soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”⁴

May God help us to pray and so to gain perspective on the big hope we are made for....

End

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⁴ Luke 21:29-33.