



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
*Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sermon November 27, 2022 Rev. David Jones Reflection on the Scriptures

In lighting the candle of hope, I said the kingdom of justice, or the kingdom of God, or that peace that is like a river—whatever we call it—is not off in some distant land, it is right here, beneath our nose, in our care. That is why hope is within reach, because what we hope for is within reach. Yet that is not quite the image we get from the prophet Isaiah this morning, or from Jesus himself.

For Isaiah, not only is it a place that we must travel to, on the highest mountain, it is also a time. Isaiah says “in days to come,” which means “in the future”; in the future, God’s dwelling place on earth will be established. That is a little loftier than I had said in lighting the candle; we will have to climb up to this place. But it is interesting, though it is a destination, God doesn’t command the people to ascend to it, rather it beckons, it calls, something about it pulls on the people, they freely choose to seek it and reach it.

And then curiously, when they do reach it, they don’t stop. The point of going up the mountain into God’s own dwelling place, is to study, to learn the way or path of God. And having learned, the people will instruct others in this path, and peace, and joy, and love will be the impact on the world of this teaching. We will all come to walk in the light of the LORD, says Isaiah. Not just from one person to another, not just in our interpersonal dealings or close relationships, not even one tribe to another, like Ashfield to Conway, but rather whole nations will come to care for one another rather than competing or fighting with one another. Isaiah gives us more of a sense of a journey to undertake in Advent, but we do end up back down here, where we started, in the world as it is, now equipped to make it into something new, based on the ideas and sentiments and capacity for love that we already had when we set out on our journey.

In the Gospel according to Matthew we get another set of images, dramatic, tumultuous ones. Jesus says that the Son of Man will come on the clouds to the sound of trumpets and rushing winds, in a triumphant event, and that this Son of Man will be the sign that a fundamental break from the past is occurring to make way for a wholly new future, something altogether different. He compares this event to the Flood, and the story of Noah’s Ark. The world will be so transformed that it will be upside down, which is why we have this enchanting but also frightening image of stars falling from the sky. And Jesus is warning his audience. Where Isaiah gives us a sense of a journey, a process that will unfurl and change the world, Jesus gives us an urgent warning to keep awake or this change may pass us by.

Jesus uses this expression “Son of Man,” to prepare ‘for the coming of the Son of Man’. But “Son of Man,” which sounds very strange and mystical to our modern ears, in both Hebrew and Aramaic simply meant “Man.” Jesus is saying that someone in the likeness of a man will come, someone with a human face will come, that this will be the sign. He is saying that indeed when we recognize a human face, when we see a human face with divine glory, everything about our world will flip on its head. In other words, once again, we are back to where we started: when we see each other and our own time and place as sacred, as divine, as God with us, it will be the advent of a colossal change that cannot be stopped or avoided, whether we have undertaken a journey to or just kept awake.

When we were in the hospital with Hugo, in his first days, a nurse teased him because he was a bit lazy about feeding, he seemed to expect his mother to do all the work for him. And so the nurse called him “Prince Hugo.” Now Hugo is just an infant, which I only just learned is a compound word from

the Latin that means “not speaking.” Hugo could not actually be lazy, or hard working, he doesn’t have those concepts, and he certainly doesn’t have options to choose from, he just sort of is, he just is existing, exploring, discovering, moving sometimes cautiously sometimes haphazardly from one instinct to the next, from one jumbled bundle of vague feeling to the next. Yet this nurse imbued him, even as she teased him, with immense dignity. Even criticizing him, she made him into royalty, a very small Prince was idling in room 301. Now a nurse and Hugo’s parents cannot imagine and recognize so much humanity, even in jest, and then fail to be prepared to love and care for him at any hour.

Sometimes I wonder why we make things so complicated with scripture (or why I do). Is Jesus not just saying, that when finally we see each other in all our immense dignity, a world that allows and even fosters by design such iniquity among people, such poverty, such hunger, such thirst, such violence between people and war between nations—as ours does today—that such a world is intolerable? Jesus simply says, prepare for that hour of overwhelming human dignity. He sweetly, as a young teacher, cannot actually say when the hour will come, he truly does not know. He hasn’t figured that part out. And neither have we. But he is certain that when the instruction of God overtakes us, and changes our whole world, turning everything upside down, casting down the mighty and lifting up the humble, *that* will be when the hope of Advent has been fulfilled. So keep awake.

Alleluia and amen.