

Flash Forward

First UMC Pasadena

Rev. Allison Mark

Advent 1

November 29, 2009

Theme: Flashing Forward to Hope

Theological Lesson: "Grace does not mean an automatic exemption from the distress coming upon all peoples of the earth. Rather, let this word about what will be have a sanctifying influence, producing a prayerful watchfulness and freedom from indulgence & anxiety about things. As for the dull dissipated spirit, it is ensnared, not released by the Advent of God." – Craddock, Commentary Year C

Challenge: Hope is an action. It takes some work to make it come to fruition.

After the Thanksgiving meal was served and the family started to wind down for the evening, the two younger boys, Billy and Bobby who were spending the night at their grandparents started to get ready for bed. At bedtime, the two boys knelt beside the bed to say their prayers when Billy, the youngest one began praying at the top of his lungs ...

"Dear God!

I PRAY FOR A NEW MOUNTAIN BIKE...

I PRAY FOR THE NEWEST NINTENDO DSi SYSTEM...

I PRAY FOR A NEW SONY FLAT SCREEN TV ..."

Bobby, his older brother leaned over and nudged Billy and said, *"Why are you shouting your prayers? God isn't deaf."*

To which the little brother replied, *"No, but Gramma is!"¹*

As we transition from our Thanksgiving gratitude for the food before us and the family that surrounds around us, we are supposed to continue our attitudes of appreciation and giving thanks to God for the best gift that we are about to receive...yet, we sometimes get so caught up in the material gift giving frenzy and the commerciality of Christmas that we forget what the season of Advent is really all about. Today, as we get a *flashforward* from the prophecies of Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Psalms in our Advent reading in Luke, we ponder: *How do we move beyond the material and look towards this time of mystery and hope with a sense of awe and wonder?* Let us think on these things, let us pray:

¹ *Christmas Funnies*, from *"The Stories and Poems of Christmas,"*

<http://our.homewithgod.com/mkathy/MerryChristmas/funnies.html>, Internet Accessed 29 November 29, 2009.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, may they be acceptable in your sight, Our God, Our Rock, and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I don't think I have too many addictions. It used to be caffeine, but I got too many headaches. I love to go out to watch movies in the theater, but during these times, going out to watch a movie is just too expensive to do all the time. Ah, food...well, that's another story for another day. BUT lately, to detract and distract me from all the busyness of work, to unwind, relax, to get away from all the tragic and terrifying news I hear, read, and see from the radio, the newspaper, or watching the 11pm news, Andy and I have taken up a really bad habit.

We caved in when we moved to Southern California and we bought TiVo. (or DVR, for those of you who have Digital recorders). DVR is amazing, you can record your favorite television shows if you have a Lay Leadership or Missions meeting, you can catch up on a bunch of movies...all without commercials!! Unfortunately, my downfall has been weekday evening programming. And on Thursday nights, we record ABC's new hit series, *FlashForward*, not only so we can "flashforward" all our commercials, but because this television show, loosely based on the novel by science fiction writer Robert J. Sawyer, gives a very interesting perspective on what would happen to us if we got a glimpse of our future. But if you really think about it, how *would* that knowledge change our lives? How would it change the way we live? How we treat other people.

Quite akin to the strange series, *Lost*, which is shot in my old hometown, *FlashForward* takes place in my new hometown, the Los Angeles area. Just to give you a brief synopsis of the show, on October 6, 2009 "a mysterious event causes everyone on the planet to

simultaneously lose consciousness for 137 seconds, during which people see what appear to be visions of their lives approximately six months in the future (on April 29th, 2010 to be exact)—a global “flashforward” (if you will).” To go a little further, think Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dicken’s “A *Christmas Carol*.” when Scrooge is spirited off by the Ghost of Christmas Future to see what lies ahead for him and those he has encountered.

But I digress, back to *FlashForward*—so the storyline has a team of Los Angeles FBI agents leading the charge of finding “*what happened, why, and whether it will happen again.*” Meanwhile, personal revelations contained within the flashforwards begin to occupy the personal lives of the principal characters. Main character, Mark Benford sees his alcoholism relapsing, his wife sees herself with another man, and other characters grapple with similarly unexpected or surprising revelations in their flashes forward.”²It seems to the characters in this hour long TV show, that whether the outcomes of their flashforwards are positive or negative in their lives, it seems to affect how they are choosing to live their lives in the present.

This is not unlike what we are reading in this morning’s texts. We hear in the prophet Jeremiah’s writings that “*these days are surely coming,*” says God. Who and where is this “righteous Branch” that will spring up for David? Who is this person they speak of that shall “*execute justice and righteousness in the land?*” Who will save the promised land and God’s righteous people?

And it is in our New Testament text that we take Luke and flashforward into the season of Advent. And here, another prophecy and apocalyptic lesson is given (and this is only a

² Wikipedia, *FlashForward*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FlashForward#Recurring_characters, Internet Accessed 20 November 29, 2009.

part of the stories and lessons that Christ is sharing with his disciples.) As we hear the words of Luke 21:25-36, we get a small glimpse of our future. And parts of Luke's visions are not unlike our evening newscasts – scary and terrifying! ²⁵*“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”* To start the season of Advent with our knees trembling and lips quivering for what is to come, is such an expected way to start a season preparing us for hope, peace, joy, and love. Yet, that's what this season is about—waiting for the unexpected. Not knowing, yet having the insider scoop of what is to come. Waiting for a mighty King to reign, yet in our yearly glimpse of what is to come, we always start with a humble baby.

But not today, our flashforward tells us that we *“will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

Gosh, but how can we look ahead that far? How is this even possible, that we are given the invitation of knowing what is to come? How are we supposed to find hope beyond despair? Especially during a season where we are expected to be filled with Christmas joy and cheer?

This Thanksgiving, as we have for the past three years, Andy and I drove to Phoenix, Arizona to be with Andy's side of the family. This year, Thanksgiving dinner was going to be at his mom's house. Amongst the regular cast of characters at our holiday feast were Andy's brother and family, Mom, and Grandma, and this year, Andy's mom's

friend Penni. I met Penni last year as she helped with our Arizona wedding reception. She was a cheery and charming woman with such a contagious and spirit that it was hard not to smile when near her. She was a successful contractor and construction site manager, quite unusual for a woman of her stature— about 5’ tall—yet, not so unusual for a woman who grew up with three brothers and a father who taught her to arm-wrestle as a kid.

This Thanksgiving, Penni was temporarily living with Andy’s mom after losing two homes and having to find work at Starbucks. She had sold all of her things and only kept 12 large boxes—mostly of keepsakes and things given to her by others and her car. As some of you may already know that building and developing is no longer a commodity in Arizona. But what struck me most about Penni’s situation was that even if she had been internally “freaking out” or questioning whether or not “God had her back,” her outward attitude was so positive and so warm as she glowed in her faith saying, “I will make this better. God will make this better. God is working through me and through all of this.” Being positive and hopeful in such a desperate time takes a lot of work. But that’s what the season of Advent is saying. It’s about hope being a verb. Hope being an ACTION word. That hope as a discipline means that we must proactively work *with* God to be able to see beyond the tragedies and hardships. That hope gets us to a place where we are only anticipating that the BEST IS YET TO COME! It is in THAT *hope* that Penni can see past the hardships and can flashforward her self into a more positive place.

As Garrison Keillor, the creator and star of National Public Radio’s show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, often writes skits about the struggle, rejection, and hardships faced by

writers, he says, “But that’s okay, because for a writer, everything is material.” And what would be the alternative? Rev. John Zehring of South Church United Church of Christ in Andover, Massachusetts says, “What if you saw your life that way: that failure, rejection, or achievement are preparation or material for God to use with the hope that, for you, the best is yet to come?”

That in this Recession when we have sat around Thanksgiving tables with family members who are going through financial rough times, who are walking away from jobs and homes they worked hard for. When people we know are struggling with relationship troubles, health issues, depression. When people we love battle addictions and personal troubles. When we become more aware of the wars that are going on around us, that hunger and poverty are everywhere, when tragedies strike...we look for the glimmers of hope that await us. We sit, listening to NPR, waiting to hear that the stock market did better today, or the rate of unemployment is going down. We wait by the phone to hear the results of a loved ones’ medical tests or that they can come home for Christmas. And it is in the waiting, the watching, and anticipating for the coming of the Christ Child that we are reminded that HOPE also means that we are to be active doers in the process. That we are the ones to make Christ’s telling of our future days be true.

As we are people who believe in grace, the undeserving blessings that God has given us, we are also reminded that *“grace does not mean an automatic exemption from the distress coming upon all peoples of the earth. Rather, let this word about what will be have a sanctifying influence, producing a prayerful watchfulness and a freedom from indulgence and anxiety about things.”* So whether we are praying for each other, making

meals for the hungry, or sending messages of encouragement for friends and family who need a sign of hope...it is time to let the word out, that by spreading hope, this is how we believe in hope's promise to come!

As Jesus told the parable saying: *“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.* Today, we acknowledge the first day of Advent. To us, it is the winter season (a mild one, for us in California), but to entertain thoughts of a spring flashforward budding with fresh life, that is certainly welcome, but it's still a ways off. After all, just yesterday, we could see snow on the San Gabriel mountains! Yet, *“hope springs eternal”³* And HOPE is the first word of Advent. We wait for these leaves and buds to come next year as we anticipate that the best is yet to come.

In our awaiting of the Christ child to come, we will go through the days of Advent seeking the additional feelings and emotions of Peace, Joy, and Love. But we start with hope's promise. As 20th century English writer, G.K. Chesterton writes: *“Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all...As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength.*

In all this flashforward of the Biblical texts, didn't someone see a baby in the story somewhere? Isn't that who we, as modern day people are waiting for? Although today's prophecy flashforwards us to a mystery beyond a physical Jesus, but an adult Jesus

³ Alexander Pope, poem.

coming on a cloud, we know that our glimmer of the future brings us a child first. And usually, on the Sunday of Advent we are expecting flashforward stories and images of a child that will change our lives forever. In thinking about the times of Christ and comparing them to our modern day world, I think about bringing a child into this world. A world of troubles and suffering? Not unlike the times of Jesus wars were also raging between the tribes, between countries and nations. Illness and disease was not uncommon. We know that there was also hunger and poverty for the people of Christ days as well. Yet, look around you. We are those people who have hope. Our power of hope and the belief that we can do better for God—that we can change the world for good, still remains. Look at the children and youth around you. Look at our families that are ready to bring new life into this world...Jeff and Allison Ash, Serafin Alvarez and Sarah Brunkow, Laura and Brian Britvec, Rebecca and Mike Perry...and to flashforward to another family (and what better time than a Sunday of *hope* to make an annunciation), Andy and I are also expecting next summer. It is in this sharing, that each of us are to be aware of what the world is like now, but if we are all to be children of the light and people of Christ, we hope against hope that in all this new life that God is present and willing to transform each of us today and everyday. That it is in our church community and in the raising and nurturing of all the children and youth of this church that there is hope. That Christ will come...that Christ has already come...and that Christ will come again to us in all ways, large and small.

And the message that we are continuously reminded of today, is that as we consider this first day in advent, we are to remember that as Christians this is a season to be watchful, wary, and vigilant we, but also to be reminded that the church, that YOU are bringing life

into a world FULL of hope. And that we must be active participants in this hope. And although waiting and watching are not always easy as we often get distracted by the worries of this life and caught up in worldly things, it is in the coming of Christ from such ordinary means that we are ordinary no more. That things are not what they seem. That normalcy and predictability have disappeared forever. That with anticipation we know that there are better things in store for us if we believe, trust, and have faith. And as we wait for the coming of the Christ child in the birth of a helpless baby, we know that nothing will be the same again! For the best is yet to come!

Benediction

From TV shows to commercial advertising to presents, presents, presents.
We are asked to pause to remember the true meaning of the Season of Advent.
So, THIS Advent, go forward out of these doors watching and waiting.
Go forward believing and trusting.
This Advent go forward and spread the word of hope,
For it is in our flashforward that we know our days will be filled with Hope, Peace, Joy,
and Love. Amen and Amen. .

*A post-sermon note:
December 16, 2009*

After making our announcement in this sermon about expecting a child next summer, on Friday, December 11th, Andy and I miscarried and lost our pregnancy. We have been thankful for the love and support of our immediate family and friends as well as our communities of faith. In taking words preached to heart, I still remain constant that there will always be hope. And it is through our own hardships and struggles, that there is comfort in knowing that God is continually working through us and with us to transform and prepare us for what is to come.