

Church of the Crossroads
The First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2006
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ADVENT 1: A COMMUNITY OF HOPE

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
Luke 21:25-36

Last Monday evening, the journalist Dahr Jamil spoke in Weaver Hall on the subject “The Ground Truth in Iraq.” His words were not universally well received among those who have worked so hard to end this senseless and tragic war. In effect, Dahr Jamil said that even though a majority of the American people is now opposed to the war, and even though the Congress is now in the control of the Democratic Party, the war will go on and on. It does not matter who is in control. Policies are now in place that will make any kind of withdrawal impossible. We are in Iraq to stay. A new American Embassy, as large as the Vatican City, is now being constructed in Bagdad. Five permanent U.S. bases are being established. All this does not sound as if there will be any readiness to bring our troops home. The wheels of war will grind on no matter who is in office or what the will of the American people may be. I am reminded of something William Stringfellow said years ago. He said that when the demonic takes hold of institutions, whether of the government or church or business, it takes on a life of its own.

A friend of ours was so discouraged by what Dahr Jamil said that she walked out of Monday’s gathering. Somehow, we still place our hope on our own well-meaning efforts to change the world. We think that the power to bring about a just and peaceful world lies within us.

We are undeniably children of the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement of the 18th century which replaced the primacy of religion with the primacy of human reason. The people of the Enlightenment believed that 1) nature is to be trusted over grace; 2) that the world on its own is going to develop towards autonomy and maturity; 3) that education will progressively lead to humanization and the fruits of democratization and civilization, and 4) that history is essentially open to the future of its own completion. The Enlightenment successfully relegated religious faith to the periphery of intellectual life. Grace was replaced by nature. Faith was

replaced by reason, and God was replaced by a reliance on human achievement.

History itself has pointed to the failure of these Enlightenment principles. We need only recall the Holocaust, two world wars, Vietnam, apartheid, Rwanda, and now Israel-Palestine, Iraq, the Sudan, and global warming. Surely, we are now beginning to doubt our human capacity to bring about the world for which we have longed. And yet we still have not quite given up on ourselves. Apartheid was evil, we say, but look at Nelson Mandela. Look at the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Look at the achievements of the civil rights movement. Who says that we human beings cannot achieve good things? We can, if we try hard enough.

History, again, undercuts this kind of human bravado. The Berlin Wall falls and a wall surrounding Palestinian villages is constructed as well as one on the US/Mexico border. The civil rights movement did provide a measure of justice for African American people, but now the global economy has impoverished millions of others. Nelson Mandela was released from prison, but Ehren Watada most likely will be incarcerated.

I wonder when we human beings will ever find the courage to let go of our belief in our own capacity to bring about the world for which we long and reject the kind of optimism that says there is nothing we cannot achieve if only we have the will to achieve it.

I want to suggest this morning that this optimistic belief in ourselves is the source of false hope, and that it is the task of the Christian community to unmask the false hope that keeps us from the kind of hope that is true and authentic.

We are surely called to be a community of authentic hope, and the Season of Advent presents us with the possibility of getting it right, so to speak, for Advent is a season that has the capacity to unmask the illusions by which we live. Advent recognizes that we are in need not of some kind of renewed trust in ourselves but in need of a God who has come to us and who will come to us. Only with the God who came to us in Jesus and the God who will continually come into our lives can there be authentic hope, not a false hope which in the end can only defeat us, but a hope that is given birth in us as a sheer act of grace on God's part.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote these words (before the days of inclusive language, I might add):

No one can pray for the kingdom . . . who thinks up a kingdom for himself . . . who lives for his own worldview and knows a thousand programs and prescriptions by which he would like to cure the world . . .

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Thy Kingdom Come*
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 34.

The prayer of Advent is a prayer for the kingdom that is to come and this prayer excludes any thought of a kingdom of our own devising. Hope is the coming reign of God. On our own, in the face of the power of the demonic, we cannot end the war in Iraq. It is now out of our control. Only God can bring peace. The coming reign of God is the only source of authentic hope.

The faithful have always sensed this. Said the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem in the 6th century B. C. E., who were surrounded by ruin and devastation, *“The days are surely coming, says the Sovereign God, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.”* Would that Israel today could hear those words afresh and stop taking things into their own hands! Six centuries after the prophet Jeremiah spoke words of hope to a defeated people, when the early Christians themselves found themselves longing for the coming reign of God, they recalled the parable of Jesus, *“Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”*

The faithful look for a coming reign of God, a coming kingdom. Like the Psalmist, they wait for it, expectantly.

Now there is a danger in what I have just said. If our only hope is the coming reign of God, then there is a danger of us sinking in passivity, into the idea that there is nothing for us human beings to do. Here, we need to understand that the reign of God is not only a coming reign; it is also a reign

that is already present in our world. After all, even though we find ourselves in the Season of Advent, we know that God has already come to us in Jesus. Jesus has already issued a call to discipleship. God's reign is not only future. It is also past and present.

That present reign of God we experienced yesterday at the 2nd FACE housing summit. For me, it was evidenced in the presence of Wallace Ching. He is the son of Clarence Ching who constructed Kukui Gardens for those who are in need of affordable housing. In order to preserve the legacy of his father, Wallace has stood firm against the Kukui Gardens Corporation that wants to sell out the complex to the highest bidder without any guarantee of continued affordability.

I believe that Wallace Ching is a sign of the present reign of God because it is clear that he has been motivated to do what he is doing from something beyond himself. He is a disciple.

We too are called to be disciples. By definition, disciples are accountable to someone else, or they would not be disciples. We are accountable to the God we have discovered in Jesus the Christ who has come, who comes, and who will come.

So it is that we are called to put hope into action. We are called to act not out of the illusion that we alone can achieve a world made new, but out of our commitment to the God who has come to us in Jesus, and who continues to come, and who will come. That is why we must witness against the war, even though we know that it is here to stay. That is why when we see a Wallace Ching standing up for the residents of Kukui Gardens, we see God's reign being fulfilled in the earth. That is why when we read about Paul Farmer giving his life for the people of Haiti, we see God's reign being realized among the poor. That is why when we are led to house families of Family Promise in Weaver Hall, we see God's reign taking place in our very midst. That is why when the people of Kukui Towers (not to be confused with Kukui Gardens) organize and save their building, we see God's reign taking root in our own community.

The Advent promise is that God still comes to us and will continue to come to us and to all. God will make wars cease to the end of the earth, even the Iraq war that seems to be here to stay. God lifts up the poor and fills the hungry with good things, as Mary said in her Magnificat. This God,

my friends, who brings and will bring newness of life to the earth and its people is the source of our hope, our authentic hope.

We are to be a community of hope, a community of expectant waiting, a community of prayer, a community ready to put hope into action. We are to be a community that looks always to the God who has come to us in Jesus the Christ, who comes into our world, sometimes even through us, and the God who will come to make all things new. So let us be that community of authentic hope we are called to be. Amen.

Note: This sermon is largely indebted to H. Russel Botman and his chapter, *Hope as the Coming Reign of God*, found in *Hope for the World*, Walter Brueggemann, ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)