

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros
(Delivered on Sunday, November 29, 2015)

Text: Luke 21:25-36 (*NRSV, adapted*)

“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 powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Chosen 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.”

Then he told them a parable: “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.

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Chosen One.”

Reflections by Rev. Lorraine Cenicerros: “A Four Letter Word that Begins with H”

How is everyone this morning? Have you started to recover from the long holiday weekend? Meals with family and friends, some shopping done here and there. Maybe even some much needed down time. This weekend I was more acutely aware of the early start of the holiday shopping season because my daughter recently started a new job in retail. I wasn’t aware of it in a bad or judgmental way but I was aware of it because the business where she works opened at 6:00pm on Thursday evening, Black Friday actually began a day early. I stopped by her work on that evening so see how she was faring and I have to say I was pleasantly surprised. The crowds were not too thick and people were polite. It could have been any Thursday evening. My daughter was not frazzled, the store felt calm and for that I was thankful. To some that might seem like a superficial thing to be thankful for but when it comes to our loved ones it is often the small blessings that can be most precious.

It is at this time of year when we are called to give thanks for what we have in our lives. In elementary school we play out the commonly held history of the first thanksgiving between the pilgrims and the native peoples of this country. As we grow older it becomes more about thankfulness for family and friends, for the community and relationships in our lives. But how do we do that when the world around us seems to have grown darker and more violent.

How do we give thanks in our lives when there is violence across the world and violence in our own streets? How do we give thanks when immigrants, exiles, evacuees, refugees (whatever you are comfortable calling these families) are fleeing their homes, everything that is familiar to them to save their lives? How do we give thanks when feelings of anti-Muslim, anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-other (for that matter) are growing and appear to have no end in sight?

Timothy Murphy the Director of Progressive Christians Uniting reminds us in his article *Giving Thanks in a World Gone Mad* that “a core insight of the Christian tradition . . . is to give thanks in the midst of dark

times. We don't give thanks to ignore all that's wrong with our world but to help us keep walking when we feel the tug of despair.”

And so we are called to give thanks in the face of anguish. We are called to give thanks when the world around us appears to be falling into ruin. We are called to give thanks that God is with us, in our desolation and in our joy. We are called to give thanks that the scriptures tell us God will have the last word. We are called to give thanks as the church calendar year ends and the New Year begins on this first Sunday of Advent.

The word "advent" comes from the Latin "adventus" meaning "arrival" or "coming," particularly of something having great importance. Advent marks the four Sundays before Christmas when we spiritually prepare for the birth Jesus. In the early church the celebration of Advent typically involved a season of prayer, fasting and repentance, followed by anticipation, hope and joy.

Today we celebrate Advent not only by thanking God for Christ's first coming to Earth as a baby, but also for his presence among us through the Holy Spirit. For more conservative or evangelical denominations actively prepare for and anticipate Christ's final coming at the end of time. It's interesting that at the beginning of the church year at the start of the season of Advent the lectionary brings us to a place where there is talk of the eschaton, the end of the world with nations in fear and people dying in agony. But rather than reading this scripture as foreboding signs of the future, the Second Coming of Christ, we can read it as a telling of truth that the condition of the world has not changed from then to now and in seeing what is, we can move towards the Hope reflected in the newly sprouting leaves of a fig tree.

Hope in the future even as we are called to be realistic about what we see today.

Theologian David Lose writes, about Hope as being “both fragile and powerful, fragile because it exists against all odds and in the face of much that seems hopeless; powerful because it creates new possibilities and in being shared, multiplies. Not optimism . . . but hope. For while optimism assumes things will soon get better, hope testifies that whether things get better or worse ultimately God's good will for us and all creation will prevail. And rooted in that promise, we can take action today, standing with the good, opposing evil, and doing what we can, not because we expect or need to save the world, but rather because we believe that since God will save the world we are free to throw ourselves into taking care of the little corner of the world in which we find ourselves.”¹

On May 7, 1824 Beethoven shared his Ninth Symphony with the world even though he could never hear it. With that symphony the world was given a joy through music that fueled hope which changed history.

Benjamin Zander the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra tells us in the Documentary *Following the Ninth* that from “Tiananmen Square in China where the symphony was played over the loudspeakers during the revolution, to the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin where it was played when the walls fell down, it seems to express most completely what human beings are struggling for, what is possible for humankind. It is music of transformation, it is what we dream of. It is a battle cry for humanity.”

From the beginning of the First World War when the Ninth Symphony was introduced to the Japan through the German prisoners camp the symphony became and big part of the Japanese culture. After the earthquake of 2011 the choral singing of Daiku or the Ninth brought a devastated people together.

During the tyranny of the rule of Pinochet in Chile the music of the 9th symphony gave political prisoners the Hymn of Joy. One such prisoner tells of being held in a small cell with a window blocked by iron bars. Through that window all he could see was a concrete wall. Women had gathered outside the jail facility in protest of the conditions of the prisoner's lives, the conditions of all of their lives. The voices rose singing to the music of Ode to Joy:

*Listen Brother to the Song of Joy,
Come Sing, as you sing live as you dream of the new sun.
When men will be brothers again.
The Cheerful song for those who await for a new day.²*

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/10/on-hope/>

² *Beethoven Ninth (9th) Film, Following The Ninth.* Directed by Kerry Candaele. Film.

The gentleman said hearing the music was like having a colorful butterfly in his heart, it was fantastic, it was hope.

Beethoven's music gave hope to people during hopeless times. Hope, fragile and powerful invites us to action. Invites us to not just imagine the world as the kin-dom of God but actively work towards God's dream for her world.

In 2007 British Punk Rock Legend Billy Bragg was asked to write English verses for the Ode to Joy to celebrate the reopening of the Royal Festival Hall. It is with these lyrics that I leave you as we move into the Hope of Advent:

*See now like a Phoenix rising from the ashes of the war
Hope of ages manifested peace and freedom evermore
Brother, sister stand together raise your voices now as one
Low by history divided, reconciled in unison*

*What's to be then, O my brother?
Sister, what is in your heart?
Tell me now the hopes you harbor
What's the task, and where to start?³*

*Though now speak ten million voices, every word is understood:
Furnish every heart with joy and banish all hatred for good!*

Amen

³ *Beethoven Ninth (9th) Film, Following The Ninth.* Directed by Kerry Candaele. Film.