

Like Never Before: The Wreath

Preached by

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Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Gospel Reading: Mark 13:24-37

But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep wake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

Message: *Like Never Before: The Wreath*

Once upon a time, there was a family, pretty much like any other family and, of course, unique in their own way. This is part of their story.

It was the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. Jess was sitting, slumped on the couch in the family room, staring into the fire. She was alone. Lexi and Shawn were in their rooms, playing computer games or talking to friends or doing homework. She snorted. “Homework”—what an obsolete word. All work was homework now—the kids were on a remote learning schedule and she and Brian were working from home

Brian was in his basement workshop working on a surprise. She couldn’t imagine how there could be any surprises. They were all living in one another’s hip pockets.

Thanksgiving dinner had been barely bearable without her parents and Brian’s sister and brother-in-law and their kids around the table. Everyone was safe and healthy and for that she was truly grateful, but... She was aware of the passage of time—her parents were getting older. Her niece would be off to college next year. It felt like time was slipping away. There was little laughter, and like today, they scattered to different parts of the house instead of playing games or watching a Christmas movie together. They got along fine but this enforced togetherness was getting on everyone’s nerves. The most positive thing that could be said for the day was that it was probably the healthiest Thanksgiving meal they had ever eaten. It had the requisite dishes: turkey breast—no gravy, she refused to use canned gravy—sweet potatoes instead of mashed, roasted Brussel’s sprouts, homemade cranberry sauce and just one kind of pie—pumpkin.

They’d streamed the church’s worship service this morning. The beginning of Advent. Because it was the first day of a special season, Shawn had literally dressed for church and tried to shame the rest of them into doing so as well. They weren’t having any—but she knew he’d start his campaign earlier next week and they would probably all dress for worship next Sunday. She’d always liked this season, the unfolding decorations, the special events, the shared meals, cookie walks and the growing anticipation of Christmas. About the only thing she didn’t like were the traditional readings. They were so out of synch with where the world was. Wars and fires, blood moons and a sun that went dark, sin, despair, and judgement. They were so dark and depressing, at a time when everywhere outside of church, things were lightening up, brightening up, people greeting strangers, hugging friends in the grocery and throwing parties and making special foods, crowding the stores, buying presents, planning holiday trips. Of course, hardly any of that was happening this year.

Jess sat up a little straighter thinking that over. Maybe this year, the scriptures were more reflective of life than she had experienced them to be in the past. No blood moon or darkened sun, but there were wildfires and horrendous storms. Disease stalked the planet, and some were making effective arguments that it had been set loose by the way humans had tended the planet and how little regard many had for others. A kind of judgement in its way. Maybe for the first

time, she understood how people must have felt before that first Christmas, the despair that must have haunted them, and the constant wondering when it was going to end.

She thought back to the service again, this time focusing on the lighting of the first candle on the Advent wreath. She wasn't sure why, but she'd always especially liked that part of the service. The four of them had even lit the candles one year, keeping a close eye on Lexi, who was fascinated by fire and swung the lighter pretty wildly.

She remembered her and Brian going through all the holiday decorations on Friday. They had done a lot of quaran-cleaning earlier in the year, but they had saved that corner of the basement until now. They had found an Advent wreath, still in its original package, untouched. One of her elderly aunts had given it to her/ them for a shower or wedding gift. They never really talked about it. They were regular church goers and weren't offended, but it seemed like the wreath in church was enough. It was on the donate pile.

Suddenly inspired, she decided to take a look at it. She could get it without going near Brian's workshop. Upstairs again, she pried open the package, the ancient brittle scotch tape crumbling away and sat the wreath on the table. It was simple—a wooden circle with four candleholders along the rim and one in the center. Carved on the ring between the candles were the words, "Hope," "Faith," "Love" and "Joy." She rummaged around in the china closet and found 5 candles that would fit. She sat it in the center of the table, but she had to admit it looked a little—well—it looked a little naked. She grabbed her jacket and garden shears and snipped some yew branches off a shrub next to the porch. She arranged them in the center of the circle. There. That was better. She knew that technically, an Advent wreath wasn't a centerpiece, but it wasn't like there weren't a lot of traditions going by the way this year.

The family gathered for dinner and everyone eyed the wreath without saying anything. So, she said, "We are going to say a prayer and light a candle each week and see what happens. We will take turns, but I'll go first, so everyone has a chance to think about it before their turn."

She read a line of scripture she remembered from Isaiah: "On that day, the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see." Then she prayed: "Creating God: You made all that is and separated the light from the darkness. Today, we remember your power and grace and the hope that we have in you. As a sign of our hope, we light this candle, its light shining boldly in the face of all that would overcome your purposes. Amen." Jess lit the candle and looked around. As anticipated, Lexi leaned in close and Jess noticed her face was warm with the golden light of the flame. The lenses of Shawn's glasses reflected twin images of the flame and Brian's watch crystal glittered. The beveled edge of the mirror above the sideboard sparkled with multiple flashes of fire and the single flame shone brightly back from the window against the dark night.

Jess realized the light of one candle doesn't overcome the darkness, but it does reveal places where the light can shine and does shine. It reminds people to look for the light even in unexpected places and in unprecedented times. The light is there, if only we have eyes to see. Hope nourished in the glow of that candle can overcome the despair while people wait for what is surely to come. So it is that, this Advent, Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn lived hopefully ever after

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: As begin the journey to Bethlehem together and prepare for the coming of your Son, we pray that we might keep a holy watch

that our eyes remain open to the need around us
that our responses remain generous
that we return impatience in driving and shopping with smiles and good will
that we take time to listen to the fears and hopes of those around us
that our gratitude for what we have and what we are about to receive
is expressed in prayers
and service

with the sick and the mourning, the hungry and the lonely,
the storm and fire battered, and the war ravaged

May we treat ourselves, those with whom we live and our neighbors with kindness, gentleness, and mercy, so that the hope that is possible with you might be sustained and encourage us this year. We pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread

Forgive us our debts

as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen