

Proper 28C
November 17, 2019
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19, 25-28

TWO POLES—AND AN AXEL

There are two poles in our readings this morning—two wildly divergent visions of where the world is heading; two polar portrayals of what God is up to in the midst of it all.

First, from the Prophet, potent words of promise aimed at just-returned exiles from Babylon who struggle to square what they thought their homecoming would look like with the real challenges they face.

See, says God through the prophet, I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight... You shall build houses and inhabit them; plant vineyards and eat their fruit... You shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for you shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and your descendants as well.

Bright words, these; light-infused words. Words that—if Israel would dare tether themselves to them—would buoy them, lift them up, transport them into a hope-filled future. **POLE ONE.**

And then there's the gospel reading, where we find Jesus in the Temple district, warning anyone who'll listen that the perceived majesty and greatness of what they see around them is really a mirage... That it's nowhere near as permanent as it seems; that like everything else in this world it has an expiration date stamped on it; that all of it—every stone—will be coming down.

Nation will rise against nation, Jesus warns, and kingdom against kingdom... There will be earthquakes, famines, plagues, persecutions, betrayals...

The list is long—and in contrast to Isaiah's vision—feels more depressing rather than hopeful; more fear-inducing than reassuring.

Two poles this morning that leave us wondering—which way will things go?

All last week the news has been trained on the impeachment hearings—and on Friday, the testimony of former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch.

It's not a stretch to imagine how Jesus' prophecy, "you will be brought before kings and governors," could hold new urgency for the former ambassador.

Amid the media glare and infantile tweets one can only hope that Marie possesses the same steely resolve as her namesake, Mary, who sang of the God who...

"scatters the proud...brings down the powerful from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly."¹

We all know there's a lot more riding on these hearings than the decision of whether to impeach the current occupant of the Oval Office or not. Our whole system of government and the principles which define our democracy are on trial here—and the whole world is watching; some with cynicism; some with delight; some with alarm; some with guarded hope.

¹ Luke 1:51-52, from Mary's song the *Magnificat*

And then we wake up Saturday morning to the news that Venice—that great world city—has once again be inundated with high tides from the Adriatic Sea; that the water in San Marco square is six feet deep, and that due to global warming, floods of this magnitude—which used to happen once every 100 years—are forecast, by mid-century, to take place every 6 years.²

So, sisters and brothers, it doesn't really take much imagination, as we look around us, to find confirmation that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, just as Jesus said it would; that things are going to fall apart before they get better.

TWO POLES—one marked by rhetoric of hope, the other by rhetoric of entropy.

Do you, like me, ever feel stuck in between?

Well, this morning, in the midst of our wondering, we have an answer to the question, where does hope reside?

Everyone knows that to get unstuck—to get anywhere, really—those two poles need a bridge—they need an axle.

And as it turns out this morning we have one! AXEL MARTIN STREIT.

Now don't worry—we're not asking six-month-old Axel to do the heavy lifting, to pull our nation and world back from the brink! But he does have something crucial to teach us this morning—to remind us that hope, if it's to be lasting, must have footings more solid than the sinking silt on which Venice is founded; moorings that run deeper than the latest crisis, however impactful that crisis may be.

And this is what the Triune God, with Axel as example, teaches us today.

That at this font the Triune God is stirring up faith, hope, and love; that in these promise-infused waters the Creator of the universe is claiming, naming, and forever choosing Axel—and us—as beloved children, who, come hell or high water, will never be orphaned or abandoned but will belong to God forever.

Katie—you first latched onto the name AXEL while watching a German bobsledder by that name compete in the Winter Olympics.

But as we dig deeper into its origins, we find that the Germanic name AXEL can be traced back to the Hebrew name ABSALOM—which means “FATHER OF PEACE.”

Let me tell you, living as we do in this world of tumultuous change and challenge, **WE NEED MORE AXELS**—more boys and men who will live up to the calling—**TO BECOME FATHERS OF PEACE**.

And MARTIN. It turns out there's not one Martin but three who inspired our little guy's middle name. Pete's father, Kenneth Martin, Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk, and Martin Luther King, Jr, a later day prophet.

What is our hope and prayer for young Axel Martin if not that he take the best attributes of his three namesakes and carry them forth into the world?

² <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/historic-flooding-highlights-venices-vulnerability/>

Of course, he doesn't do that alone. You Pete and Katie, and you, Dan and Jen, pledge yourselves to journey beside him, as do we—this whole community called PEACE.

For we—all of us—are part of the inner circle of faithful companions, teachers, mentors, lovers, sisters and brothers, who promise to walk beside AXEL as he learns to find his balance and make his way into the world; as he learns to say YES to certain choices and NO to others.

We need Axel this morning to remind us of how God's grace and blessing come to us before we are ready to understand our need for it. But Axel needs us, too, to show him what walking the Jesus Way looks like; to tell him, when life gets hard and disappointments come, that God—that we—are on his side.

After all the talk of downside; after all the apocalyptic rhetoric in our gospel reading, the last thing Jesus has to say to those who stand with him in the shadow of the Temple is this:

“When [all] these [terrible] things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

When all hell breaks loose in our world and in our lives. When what we hold dear is being trampled on or inundated and it feels as if life is breaking apart piece by piece, keep your head up, says Jesus, because something new is also breaking in.

Gloom & doom may be signs of the times, as they have been in each generation since Jesus. But Jesus doesn't preach gloom and doom. He preaches hope.

- **Keep your head up. Don't be afraid. I will give you wisdom. You will endure.**

We are a hope-bound, not a fear-bound people! And because HOPE rather than FEAR is our motivator, the task to which we are called is simply this: Bearing witness to the hope that is in us.

When Brother Martin felt the devil's onslaught; when Satan whispered toxic words in his ear, telling him that he was worthless and that God didn't give a whiff, he'd hurl back the reply, **“I AM BAPTIZED!”** And Satan would go slinking away.

It was the most powerful retort he could make.

Friends, baptizing Axel Martin this morning is the most radically hopeful thing we can do!

Standing between two poles, in full view of a world dominated by fear and death, we claim for him God's promise of life! Life abundant, life everlasting! Life that truly is life.

And in claiming this for him, we reclaim it for ourselves. Amen.