

BOUNDLESS HOPE

Our boundless hope comes from God's boundless presence.

Luke 21:25-36

December 1, 2024 | Advent C1

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/boundless-hope/

I.

Peekaboo is a game played all over the world. You don't have to speak the same language to play peekaboo. One person hides their eyes and slowly reveals them to a small child. This causes sounds of laughter, which causes us to laugh in turn. Then we do it again. And again.

An early theory of why babies enjoy peekaboo is that they are surprised when things come back after being out of sight. Babies light up with joy when they realize someone hasn't vanished forever but is right there, waiting to surprise them. Peekaboo becomes a joyful proclamation: "I'm still here! You're still here!"

Psychologists call this principle 'object permanence' and suggest that babies spend the first two years of their lives working that principle out, which makes those two years prime peekaboo time. So, the game isn't just fun; it helps babies test and re-test a fundamental principle of existence: **things stick around even when you can't see them.**

Do you remember learning object permanence as a child or with a child?

It is a fun and easy game, and as adults, we can't help but laugh when a toddler goes to hide. After counting down from 10, we find them with their head under the edge of the couch with their torso and legs in plain sight or standing behind the blinds. We grin and say out loud, "Hmm ... I wonder where Sam could be. Has anyone seen Sam? Sam, where are you?" And then, they scoot out and yell, "Here I am!" and we gasp and act completely surprised!

But the journey to this realization isn't all fun and games. Before we master object permanence, there's a deep fear and uncertainty when a caregiver steps out of view. The child is fearful that they will be gone forever. Object permanence addresses our most profound and primal fear – the fear that when we cannot see the people and objects we love and need, they must be gone forever.

That instinct is something we carry into adulthood, which is why loss is so hard. Losing someone we love can feel like the lesson of permanence has failed us. We keep expecting that person we love and miss to reappear and walk into the room, but what do we do when they don't?

Actor Andrew Garfield recently sat down with Elmo from Sesame Street to talk about his grief after his mom died recently. Andrew, who was very close to his mom, described grief as "all the unexpressed love" that remains. He said, "Sadness is kind of a gift, a lovely thing to feel, in a way, because it means you really loved somebody, and you miss them."

Grief becomes, in a way, a kind of permanence—a way to hold onto love and connection even when the person is no longer physically present. It's evidence of a bond that death cannot sever. Garfield's words remind us that love persists, even in absence.

And so does God.

If object permanence teaches us that what we love remains, Advent teaches us that *God remains*. Even in uncertainty, fear, and loss, even when we can't see what God is doing or hear God's voice, even if we struggle to feel God near, Advent invites us to trust that God is near and always moving toward us. Jonathan Davis calls this *Advent Permanence*—the promise that God's presence pursues us, even when we cannot see it.

II.

I know it can seem strange to attend church on the first Sunday of Advent, with all the delight and joy of Christmas décor, and then hear a scripture passage like Luke 21 about stars falling, seas roaring, and people fainting from fear. I don't recommend this as a bedtime story for children nestled all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums dance in their heads.

We don't find little baby Jesus lying in the manger in this text. We are greeted this first Sunday of Advent by adult Jesus standing in the temple, speaking with frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking warnings about the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down. It seems out of place to us today, but it may be the very Advent hope we need.

For those hearing these words in the first century, amid war, persecution, and the temple's destruction, it felt as though there was no hope and God had disappeared. Jesus had died, came back from death, and then left again. Jesus had said he would come back again, but it had been a few decades, and faithful people were dying, but still no Jesus. The magnificent temple, where God was believed to dwell, was now in rubble, destroyed by Rome. Losing someone and something so central to their faith probably felt like the lesson of permanence had failed them. They kept expecting Jesus to reappear and walk back into town. But what do you do when he doesn't?

But then comes Luke's gospel with these words from Jesus about signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, words that were not new or out of place to their ears. It was music to their ears. It sounded like the fulfillment of prophecy from the Hebrew scriptures that God would bring about justice to the earth. The phrase "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" points back to the book of Daniel. The parable about the fig tree would recall the Hebrew scriptures that use fig trees as a sign of peace and prosperity.

Jesus's words would have been good news of hope to the weary people of God as Jesus reminded them that God is still present, faithful, and bringing justice, even when you can't see it. Things may not stick around, but God sticks around even when you can't see God at work.

And that was their source of hope. And it's our source, too. **Our boundless hope comes from God's boundless presence.**

Advent isn't about pretending everything is fine. It's for the weary and uncertain, those longing for assurance and God's presence. Into this chaos, Jesus says, "Stand up. Raise your heads. Your redemption is near." God is still with us, pursuing us with love and presence. It is like we're that scared baby who can no longer see the one we love because of a blanket of fear and pain and war and injustice, and then, right in front of us, the blanket comes down, wrapped around a baby in Mary's arms, and God's promise is unveiled to say, "Do not fear. I am still with you. I have never left you." This is Advent Permanence. God is still coming to us, again and again, like buds on a fig tree long thought dead. This is the hope of Advent.

III.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber recently shared a reflection she called her *Autobiography of Worry*¹, and I think it beautifully illustrates how many of us carry the weight of anxiety through life.

She started with her childhood, when she worried constantly about quicksand. TV shows convinced her it was a real and likely danger. By her teenage years, she was equally concerned about the Soviet Union bombing her as she was about not getting tickets to a band concert.

In her twenties, her worries were focused on running out of rent money—or alcohol—without realizing how those two might be connected. When she got sober, her fear shifted to wondering if she'd ever be funny again, forgetting she might not have been that funny to begin with.

She recalled the Y2K panic and the fear that airplanes would fall from the sky, followed by the heartbreak of 9/11, when her anxieties intensified as a young mother. She shared how the 2008 financial collapse didn't trouble her much—because she had no money to lose. But she worried about being judged for her divorce, only to discover people didn't think that much about her at all.

Reflecting on this, Nadia realized her anxieties hadn't done anything to protect her or prevent hardship. Worry had only robbed her of the gifts of the present.

What helped her break free from the cycle of worry was a surprising source: the book of Revelation. Specifically, the passage that describes God as the one who was, who is, and who is to come. Nadia said it reminded her that every moment of worry was just a tiny piece of a much bigger story—a story where God is always present, weaving strength, beauty, and hope through time.

She concluded with this truth: "The dominant story is not the ultimate story." The loudest story is not the ultimate story. As people of faith, we're part of an ancient, sacred narrative that reminds us that God has always been with us and will always be with us, no matter our fears or anxieties.

Advent invites us to lift our eyes beyond fear and recognize the larger story God is writing. Hope allows us to trust in God's presence and purposes, even when life feels unsteady. This is Advent permanence. This is the hope of Advent. God-with-us regardless of our fears, anxieties, or circumstances. We are people of hope, and **our boundless hope comes from God's boundless presence.**

IV.

As Advent begins, let God's boundless hope transform you. It's one thing to hear that God's presence is permanent—it's another to trust it. What would change in your life if you truly lived as though God is always with you? How might it shape how you face fear, loss, or difference? Could we become more curious and less defensive if our hope was anchored in the God who was, who is, and who is to come?

This Advent, take a step of faith, however small, to reflect our hope in God's unshakable presence. Be a sign of God's love—through kindness, encouragement, or simply being present with someone who feels unseen. Let your life declare: *"I see you. God sees you. God is here. We are not alone."*

Our hope is rooted in the God who never leaves us, who draws near and makes all things new. Like buds on a fig tree, God's promises are constantly unfolding, even in seasons that feel barren. So, let's live as people of Advent permanence. Let's lift our heads, steady our hearts, and place our hope in God's boundless presence.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ https://open.substack.com/pub/thecorners/p/avoiding-despair-like-i-owe-it-money?r=m7nti&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email