[**Jeremiah 33:14-16**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 25:1-10**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#psalm_reading)

[**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#epistle_reading)

[**Luke 21:25-36**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#gospel_reading)

RESURRECTION UNTO HOPE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

This morning we celebrate the first Sunday of the season we call advent, the season in which every year we re-experience in memory the anticipation of the birth of Jesus in a manger. As children count down the days until they can finally open all those bright and tantalizing boxes under the tree, so we count down the weeks leading to what is, in a sense , the rebirth of the greatest gift of all, the gift of God's perfect and infinite love to each and every one of us. We commemorate that birth and the weeks leading up to it, and by remembering the new life of our Lord, we, in the reality of the spirit, we bring our Lord back to life. And just as the arrival of the Christ child ushered in a new and fresh spiritual reality into the material universe, so the remembrance of the birth of the Christ child ushers in a new and fresh spiritual reality for all Christians. It is the advent of a new year, a new beginning, for each one of us individually.

Although this is the first Sunday of the month, we won't be celebrating communion today, but Advent and communion really both serve the same function within the workings of spiritual reality. When Jesus taught us to take the bread and wine in memory of Him, he was pointing to the spiritual reality that memory itself is a resurrection. Each time we remember Him, we bring Him back to life, not it some metaphorical or poetic sense, but in Spirit and in Truth. His life among us is renewed and sustained and strengthened. Whether He actually, materially exists in the bread and the wine can be something for theologians to argue about; but that His spiritual reality is reaffirmed and strengthened among us is beyond dispute. He is not the bread that remains in heaven; He is the bread that *comes down* from heaven.

Each of the four weeks of Advent is given a visible symbol by the four candles we light, and each of those candles represents one of the great elements of the Christian faith. And just as the season of Advent itself does, and just as the ritual of Communion does, so also when we light the Advent candle, we are in spirit rekindling that particular element, reestablishing it at the base of our own lives.

The first candle, the one we kindled this morning, is the candle of Hope. And that explains, perhaps, why the lectionary Gospel for this morning points us to those somewhat alarming verses we read from the twenty-first chapter of Luke, verses which quote Jesus saying various things using the extremely dramatic vocabulary and images that were common to Jewish so-called Apocalyptic writings of the time. Both Matthew and Mark quote Jesus saying very similar things, and it is fairly clear that all three of the gospel writers were in fact pulling together various things that Jesus is reported to have said at various times and on various occasions and presenting them as if they were part of a single discourse or speech.

Since we don't have the actual context in which Jesus said those various things, it's impossible to know exactly how they were intended, but one thing I think we can say for sure is that they do all have a foundation in Hope, and I suspect that's why the people who originally put the lectionary together chose to ask us to reflect on them here at the beginning of Advent. To read those verses the way many do, as simply forecasting the death and destruction of the world and many or most of those in it, would be a violation of the very Spirit of the season we are now beginning to celebrate. However those verses were originally uttered from the lips of our Lord, we have the testimony of the rest of the New Testament that they were uttered in Hope, and not in threat.

Our Christian religion is at heart a religion of hope, of looking forward. We remember the past, of course, and in so doing we bring it back to life spiritually, but we do so only because the hopeful faith that resurrected life lives on into the endless future. When Jesus resurrected Lazarus back to literal, physical life, Jesus wept, and one plausible way of understanding why He wept is because he was resurrecting Lazarus from a far more glorious life into which he had already entered.

And that brings us to the other element of our service for today, our star service of memory.

Most of the stars we'll hang on our tree this morning are stars of memory, and by dedicating them to those who are no longer with us, we reenact the miracle of resurrection, just as we do in celebrating Advent and Communion. We are not just remembering all these good people, but we are ritually celebrating their memory, we are honoring their memory, commemorating their memory.

And it is in that celebration that we invoke and joyously reanimate the hope that is so fundamental to our Christian religion. The remembrance of these individuals can *be* a *celebration* because of that hope, the hope instilled in us when we accepted the great gift of eternal life through the grace of God and the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is that hope that gives our lives meaning, that gives our activities significance, that sustains us through sickness and accident, that lights our way through the darkest nights. Unlike those who ate the daily bread in the wilderness and who still died, we eat the daily bread of hope, and it nourishes us to eternal life. While we still occupy these mortal bodies, hope is the rock of our salvation and our shelter in the fiercest storms.

Even though we will almost certainly shed a few tears as we hang the stars on our tree, it is at bottom a positive and life-affirming ritual, because of that hope. We shed tears because sources and recipients of our worldly love have moved on from this world, but in our spirit we affirm and believe that those loved and loving family and friends have entered the realm where all hopes have been fulfilled. They light up the skies of heaven as brightly and beautifully as the flaming giants those little paper stars represent decorate the universe over our heads, and they will do so forever.

And so, gracious God, our sermon prayer for this morning is a prayer of gratitude and remembrance. Remembering all the great promises in your word that guarantee our hope in an endless existence with You, we thank you for the opportunity to bring our old friends and loved ones back among us in spirit through our ritual of celebration: the Memory Star service.