How are you feeling these days?  Are you hopeful?  This is the First Sunday in Advent, a season in the Church Year that is given to thoughts about the future.  Sometimes in the lessons, the future is seen in terms of last things, the things that will happen at the end of time.  The teaching about last things has a name.  It is called eschatology.  But in the Christian faith, eschatology is also hope, forward looking, forward moving.  It is hope for a future in God who is before us.  At this time of year, that hopefulness is pinned to the birth of God’s Word in the world in the person of Jesus.  On this First Sunday in Advent in particular, the theme of hope is central.  So, how are you feeling these days?  Are you hopeful, and if so, what are your hopes this Advent?  Take a minute to consider this.

This is an Advent when hope is tested.  We’ve entered a period of economic hard times, and we don’t know how hard they’re going to get.  This on top of international conflicts that need to be addressed.  We sat down to a Thanksgiving meal last Thursday, most of us with a lot still to be thankful for, but also with a sense of foreboding that there’s something threatening this Thanksgiving that may be even more threatening next Thanksgiving.  The sad sack economist Ben Stein wrote recently, “I am endlessly charmed by chatter about when this slowdown/recession will end.  Will it be late 2009?  Maybe early 2010?  Just a few days ago, a man stopped me at a party and asked, ‘Are we in the fifth inning?  The fourth inning?’
“I am charmed by these comments and questions because they assume a fact not in evidence: that the slowdown/correction/recession will end within a short time—or even within a measurable time. (N.Y.Times, “Sunday Business”, 11/23/08, p. 8)

Maybe it hasn’t hit you personally yet. Maybe hard times are still something of an abstraction for you. But even if this is true, you can still feel the shadow that is over us and the sense that the way to lift this shadow is by no means clear, not even to the alleged experts. I’m reminded of an old song by Paul Simon, written in very different circumstances:

…I don’t know a soul who’s not been battered
I don’t have a friend who feels at ease
I don’t know a dream that’s not been shattered
or driven to its knees
but it’s all right, it’s all right
for we’ve lived so well so long
Still when I think of the
road we’re traveling on
I wonder what’s gone wrong
I can’t help it, I wonder what’s gone wrong

Is there anyone in church this morning who does not feel the force of Isaiah’s plea, “O that you [God] would tear open the heavens and come down…” and rescue us from this mess. What’s that you say, God, that we were greedy and stupid and are getting what we deserve and don’t come running to you now that everything is crumbling around us.

“You have,” says God, “the Commandments, you have Jesus, you have Bible stories
galore about the wages of the kind of economic and political sins you have been committing. What did you expect?” asks God.

“Yes, God, that’s true enough, but we’re not a bunch of high rollers here at Emanuel. We’re modest people who play by the rules and pay our debts as best we can. Why is this happening to us?”

“It happening to you because it’s happening to everybody. You’re part of everybody, aren’t you? One good thing that might come out of your crisis is the appreciation that you are all in this would together, that you have to watch each other and watch out for each other. I know you people at Emanuel are modest and even generous, but you are part of a system that has been corrupt and foolish, and to be truthful (which is the only way I can be) I’m sure that even now the lessons of these times have not been learned. Anyway, I’m not tearing open the heavens and coming down. That’s not the way it works. That’s not the way it ever worked.”

“So then, God, where is our hope?” we ask desperately.

“Where it has always been, in my Word.”

“But what does that mean in our present circumstances, which seem so hopeless?”

“I’m going to give you three things to think about that may help a little bit,” says God. “First, you must not become mired in regret. Regret is backward looking and if you become full of regret you will sink into despair. You must go forward, not back.

“Second, remember that you are the creatures of love. I have not made you to languish in hardship or to be filled with sorrow. The world is a difficult place, mostly because people forget that they are the creatures of love, and if I do not tear open the
heavens and come down, this does not mean that I do not love you or that I do not want for you all manner of peace and goodwill.

“Third, face the future with compassion. You are creatures of love, and your destiny and your salvation is to love. Take care of one another, don’t push and shove, don’t try to get over on anyone else or let anyone be exploited.

“One more thing. I want to remind you that to have hope is the same things as to have me for your God. If you believe in me, you will have hope. If you have hope, you will believe in me. Hope looks to a future that the world cannot give, a future that is not just more of the same. The Advent hope is for a new way of being with one another, a new way of living in the world that is full of promise. Toward this end, I urge you to be the church. Gather together and pray and sing and take care of one another, and by so doing you will find me present in your midst. Watch out for one another. Keep awake to what you can do to live as creatures of love, even in hard times, especially in hard times.

“Let me turn you over to one of my other prophets,” says God, “Martin Luther King, Jr. back in 1967,” when he said:

“Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism….

“A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

“The call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concerns beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditioned
love for all men. This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love… if we love one another, God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.

“Your first hope as Christian people,” says God, “is that love is going to have the last word. Rather than curse the darkness in these hard times, you might do better to light a candle of hope for the illumination love can bring to the future.” Amen.

First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2008
Emanuel Lutheran Church