

Hope

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

12/1/19

The first Sunday of Advent invites us to hope. What are we hoping for in our world? What personal hopes are we carrying? What gives us hope? What causes us to despair? How did hope or the lack of hope play out for the participants who awaited the coming of the messiah in the original story?

Isaiah's words of hope certainly spoke to a deep-seated desire for the people of Israel. "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

The location of the nation of Israel has made it a point of conflict throughout its history. Israel and the neighboring countries are at the crossroads of Africa and Asia Minor, and close to Europe. Armies have occupied, conquered and traveled through this land. Isaiah's vision of a messiah bringing peace was an enduring hope for all the people. If peace just came, if the invaders went away, if one could know armies weren't consuming the produce of the land and conscripting sons and raping women, the world would be better.

Hope was also individual. Zechariah and Elizabeth had given up all hope of having children. Then, when he oversaw one of the important rituals of priest hood, he was visited by an angel and promised a child. Understandably, given his and his wife's age, he disbelieved. He was given 9 months of silence to contemplate the meaning of hope until John, who was to be called the Baptist, was born and named. Elizabeth, his wife, found a double path to hope in the story. Not only did she bear the future herald of the kingdom, but she also proved to be a comforting caregiver for Mary.

Mary's story is a complicated one. An unexpected pregnancy, fear of her parents' reaction, fear of the loss of a future spouse, even fear of death if some zealots in the community decided to exercise the Law to its full extent. Despair and withdrawal would have been an easy choice to make. Instead Mary took the path of hope, even it seemed impossible. Little wonder that early traditions of the church held Mary in such high regard.

Joseph was invited to accompany Mary on this path of hope. He had to lay aside his distrust for her, his concerns about what his family and the community would think, his common sense and place hope in words delivered in a dream.

Or how about travelers from the east, men hoping they were reading signs in the heavens correctly. The inn keeper often gets painted a villain, but it's possible the stable was the bottom

floor of his home, where animals were housed. At least it would be warm, and he hoped this would be enough for this beleaguered young, very pregnant couple who likely only had enough to pay a tax. Perhaps the inn keeper's wife served that night as a midwife and nothing can stir hope like the arrival of a new life.

Then there are shepherds. They hoped for a better place in the world. Shepherds were one of the lower castes of society. The profession was dirty, tiring, and dangerous. Considerable time was spent in harsh weather. Caring for the animals was back breaking. They were hard working and like most hard-working professions, they played hard. That made others in society keep them arm's length. They hoped for just a little more respect. And the angels made them the first and only announcement stop. Talk about fulfillment of hope!

You may have noticed that everyone in the story seems to have had a tough story of their own, as well as the generally tough story common to the times. Does that mean we have to endure suffering and estrangement in order to find hope?

But we are viewing this the wrong way. All of us endure suffering in our lives. All of us will feel pain and estrangement. When those come into our lives, know this. The God of hope is working through our suffering to bring hope.

When we encounter suffering, we could be tempted to seek hope in the wrong places. The letter to the Romans warns of this. The city of Rome afforded all sorts of diversions that could easily pull new disciples away. Paul warned of the dangers of reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, and licentiousness. We might not think of that kind of behavior as a way of finding hope, but we can easily plunge into sinful behavior to mask feelings of despair and loneliness. For a time, it seems to help and then the feelings wear off and we find we are even more lost.

It's tempting to view ourselves as good people if those sins don't strike us as a current part of our life. We would do well to remember Jesus' warnings about how even thoughts cause us to stumble. And the amount of consumption we engage in at this time of year certainly can look much like reveling and drunkenness. Paul throws in two other behaviors that are common to us "good folks": quarreling and jealousy. Scripturally those are there are just as bad as all those other traps Paul has listed. We fall into those for the same reason. We despair and this stirs us to anger and to seeing what others have and coveting their lives. We fight and we grow envious. And we still have no hope!

Where can we find hope? The phrase Paul uses is putting on the armor of light. A similar phrase is to be clothed with Christ. In the ancient world donning the garments of a greater person imparted their power and character to a wearer. Elijah dropped his cloak on Elisha when he was carried away by fiery chariots and Elisha assumed his prophetic role. Paul is urging us to don the character of Christ. This leads us to a true hope and help us avoid the pit of despair.

Christ sought to bring hope to others. This aspect of Christ's character, when practiced, will also help us find hope. Hope, like so many amazing gifts from God, grows as it is shared. Hope is contagious. We catch it when we bring it to those who are struggling, who are tempted by despair, who are lonely. Their hope comes alive and it flows back into our lives.

This month, the youth are inviting everyone to join them in Miracle on 4th with small daily gifts of hope. Gather those gifts in boxes. Wrap those boxes in extra wrapping paper if you like and bring them to the church. If you are headed out of town, bring those in the Sunday before you leave. If you are here through Christmas Eve, bring them that night. We will create our own church's pile of presents that will be distributed to through local organizations like Eve and the Greater Marietta Food Pantry. Each item on the list is something useful that will help families or individuals in need and give hope.

We can practice this in our own lives also. Consider the impact if each of us takes a moment to think about a neighbor, friend, coworker, or family member who is struggling with despair and needs hope and then do something positive for them. Be the angel announcing good tidings to a marginalized person. Be the Elizabeth to a Mary comforting someone unsure if there are any safe havens left. Be the inn keeper who finds space when no space seems available for a tired pilgrim. Be the light in the darkness. Be the reason for hope.

We now we are living in fractured times. We know about the deep political divides. We know the world has many who suffer terribly compared to us. We know of war and rumor of war. We know so now we can ask our source of hope to help us act. Break the bubble. Find someone this Advent season to engage who is very different than you are. Could be across political lines but it also could be across social lines, racial lines, economic lines. Be honest for the reasons, don't have any hidden agenda. Do it simply to learn how another human sees the world. Perhaps a friendship will form or perhaps all that will happen is your own mind and heart may be changed, but that's also a hope creating activity.

Christ was promised. Christ came. Christ promises to come again. In the chaos and the worry and the despair of the world hope grows for his peaceable reign. Turns out we have much we can do to create hope in our world. And through those actions we can help hope grow in our own hearts. Amen.