

Future Hope

As we begin the season of Advent, we find ourselves in a time and place when hope is profoundly needed. Despite the best efforts of economists and politicians of all parties, our nation and our world are mired in an economic malaise that most assumed would be over now. Members of our own congregation have felt the impact of the Great Recession – some working longer hours for the same or less return, some witnessing or even being caused to initiate the departure of valued colleagues from their businesses, some out of work after many months, some seeing less than expected returns from carefully made investments. On the international scene, whole countries, normally bastions of financial stability, face the prospect of bankruptcy: Iceland, Portugal, Spain, Greece, even Ireland, which just a few years ago was hailed as a star of the new economy. Meanwhile, reports continue to come in from around the world of tribal and national violence. Our own young men and women continue to be put in harm's way in Afghanistan and Iraq, while sectarian violence spills over into Pakistan and Egypt. Drug traffickers are the source of murderous violence in Mexico and Brazil; protesters clash with police in Britain, France and Myanmar. Now comes the drumbeat of another war between the Koreans. And, lest we forget, hundreds of thousands still live in misery in the wake of natural disasters in Pakistan, Haiti, Belize, Indonesia and other places which have escaped the attention of the press. Hope would seem almost impossible and yet, we answer the call to hope in the Scriptures this morning, our first Sunday of Advent.

The Scripture passages in the lectionary for the season of Advent always seem a bit of a shock. We most automatically think of Advent, after all, as that four week period before Christmas, a lead up to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Certainly our culture spends this four weeks and some time before that getting ready for Christmas. If we examine the Advent activities of society at all closely, however, we will quickly find that there is really very little interest in the birth of the Christ-child. No, our common consumer culture is instead with some desperation celebrating the season of the bottom line and a hoped-for profitability, turning the birth of the humble peasant King into an excuse for conspicuous consumption that would have made a Caesar or a Herod blush and which, the hucksters tell us, is necessary for both our own happiness and the health of the nation. When we consider how the consumerist version of Advent has influenced our own understanding of this season in the Church, there's little wonder that we feel off-balance, that something doesn't fit, that the world as we experience it is not quite right.

Perhaps that is when we begin to enter into the true spirit of Advent, when we look at the status quo and begin to question. To borrow a phrase from George Bernard Shaw, made famous by Robert Kennedy, not only when we see things as they are and ask "why," but when we dream things that never were and ask "why not?" Author Ronald Klug calls it being an Advent Christian. "Advent Christians," he writes, "believe Christ came, but still we sing "Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel." We believe that in Christ the kingdom of God has dawned, but still we eagerly pray "thy kingdom come" because we long for a world that is still to come. Exile, longing, watchfulness and waiting resonate with us." A rather more populist expression of this same idea of spiritual longing among Christians may be found in the words of a rock and roll song that reached number one on the Billboard chart in 1987: "I believe in the Kingdom Come/When all the colors will bleed into one/Bleed into one/Well, yes I'm still running/You broke the bonds/And you loosened the chains/Carried the cross/Of all my shame/all my shame/You know I believe it/But I still haven't found what I'm looking for." The hustle and bustle of our shopping-mad world makes us feel off-kilter during Advent because we know that

Future Hope

the way this world is simply isn't right. The real plan for our world, the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, is something else entirely. We are waiting for the Advent of our real home, of God's Kingdom Coming.

So it really is in these passages about the fulfillment of Creation that we find the true meaning of the season of Advent. The first advent of Christ, as that baby in that manger, began the process, inaugurated the Kingdom. We continue the process every time we allow Christ to come again, into and through our lives as we enter into the Body of Christ and exercise our function as a member of that Body by living out Christ's mission in our world. But the fulfillment, the completion of the process of changing our broken society and fouled world into what God has intended for us all along is still to come, in a day that we cannot yet see dawning.

That waiting, that yearning, that sense of still not finding what we have been looking for, is only bearable with hope. Perhaps the most well-known definition of hope comes from Emily Dickinson: "Hope is the thing with feathers/That perches in the soul, /And sings the tune without the words, /And never stops at all..." I prefer a definition I heard from a great Baptist ethicist, the late Foy Valentine: "Hope is the cultivation of an eschatological itch;" the insistent and persistent longing, in other words, for the Eschaton – the end time when God's will is done on Earth as it is in Heaven. We may participate in that cultivation, choosing as a matter of will to look forward to the coming of God's Kingdom, but it is surely the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives that engenders hope, which as Paul taught the Corinthians is one of the greater gifts that God gives to us, along with faith and love. Thomas Long, Professor of Preaching at Candler Theological Seminary at Emory University, writes in his commentary on Matthew, "When tomorrow is just more of today and all labors of love seem poured into a bottomless pit of human suffering, indifference, and cynicism, then it is hard to march out the front door to be a disciple. In the face of the crushing needs of the world, the only way to preserve hope, the only way to maintain a willing sense of discipleship, is to trust that at any moment we may be surprised by the sudden presence of God."

The element of hope is easy to see in the words of Isaiah this morning. His vision of a world where the tools of destruction have been transformed into farming implements rings so universally true in the hearts of humankind that a statue called "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares," depicting a man engaged in that activity, was donated to the United Nations headquarters in New York by the Soviet Union in 1959. Unfortunately, the near universality of the desire for this outcome has not prevented humankind from continuing to wage war to this very day. As Isaiah clearly understood, the activities of war are inimical to the normal supply of food to families. In his time, war preparation literally included beating any available metal, including plowshares and pruning hooks, into weapons as well as the enforced taking of both farmers and crops from fields to provide the armies rather than the populace with manpower and food. A more recent prophet said in 1953, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in a final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed." You may be surprised to know that the prophet who spoke those words was one of America's great warriors, Dwight Eisenhower. He continued, "This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children." In speaking forthrightly against a system that dashes hope, Eisenhower issued a warning against things as they are. Isaiah dreamed a dream of things that

Future Hope

are not, yet. Isaiah understood the importance of hope to sustain God's people as they wait in a prolonged season of Advent.

While it is easy for us to hear the ring of hope in Isaiah's words, it may be more difficult for us to associate hope with Jesus' words we read in Matthew this morning. It is important for us to remember that the disciples, like most 1st Century Jews in Roman-occupied Palestine, were eager for the Day of the Lord. They desperately wanted God to send a physical and political savior, someone who would turn the world upside down, put their oppressors to the sword and ransom captive Israel. In chapters 24 & 25 of Matthew, Jesus is actually disassociating the resolution of history from their expectations. All the standard formulas for determining the end of things are invalid, he tells them. Instead, they must be ready for his return at any time. How are they to be ready? As Paul Nancarrow, canon theologian for the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota writes, "not (through) any moral accomplishments, any orthodox belief statements, any liturgical practice, or any religious community membership; the only operative criterion here seems to be an aware responsiveness to the "Son of Man," the advent of divine presence in human personhood." The key to this awareness, to "being awake," comes only after he has told them three other parables convincing them that they must be ready. Jesus tells them that it is the little everyday conduct of their lives that will mark them as those watching for the Son of Man: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Our hope for our own participation in the Kingdom of God does not depend on our theology or our worship style or who or what we are in the world. It depends on us, as the Body of Christ, moving God's world towards being God's Kingdom, God's Beloved Community. The actions which we take out of hope for a world that looks more like God's creation not only arise from that hope but feed that hope as well.

We should also remember something else about these odd visions of the end times. Whether we find them in Isaiah or Matthew or Revelation or anywhere else in Scripture, the ultimate message is the same. God is in charge. Our Loving Creator, the one who entered this world as a baby in Bethlehem and suffered for us the violence of the Cross, stands at the end of all things with all things reconciled to their Creator and to each other. Our hope for our future, for the future of humankind, for the future of our planet, is not in vain. In another commentary on Matthew, Richard Swanson writes, "Jewish and Christian hopes are better characterized as expecting the Beginning of the World, not the end, the freeing and fruition of creation, not its destruction. It is a good exercise to raise your eyes to the horizon of this event." We live and wait and work in a prolonged season of Advent. But in God's time, Emmanuel will come again.

The powers of this present age would have us believe that there is no real hope for our future. The watchword of the day seems to be "Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." As it was in the days of Noah, the earth is filled with violence and the inclination of the thoughts of the hearts of many are only evil continually. As one commentator notes, "people all over the place live like there is no tomorrow and as though no one who cares is watching them anyway." But a loving God does see us and there is a tomorrow, a bright and wonderful tomorrow for which we rightly hope. I recently came across a lovely bit of writing from the Jesuit priest and peace activist Daniel Berrigan that I would like to share with you this morning. It contrasts the

Future Hope

false claims that so often ring in our ears with the truth of Scripture and it is called “Advent Credo:”

“It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young (people) shall see visions and your old (people) shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.”

Jesus said, “Keep awake.” It should be a natural instinct for us as we realize that we live in Advent. After all, even before we knew to call it Advent, which of us didn’t lie awake as a child, waiting for the Christmas morning that seemed so slow in coming? Isaiah said, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” Let us live as if we truly believed the promises of the peaceable Kingdom and Christ’s return in glory. Let us awake to the work of bringing Christ’s holy light to a darkened earth in this season of Advent. Amen.