

## **First Sunday of Advent: Hope**

**Isaiah 11:1-6      Romans 8:18-25**

As I mentioned earlier, we are following the traditional themes of the 4 Sundays of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love. And if there was ever a year when these 4 words, these 4 strong Biblical themes were relevant and meaningful, it's this year! I've never used the word "pandemic" so many times in my life! And along with it, "quarantine." And "political \_\_\_\_\_." And the phrase "racial justice." We and our world need hope. We and our world need peace. We and our world need joy. We and our world need love. But these are not just individual practices or character traits that we possess. These are all embodied in Jesus Christ at his coming: Jesus is hope; Jesus is peace; Jesus is joy; Jesus is love.

So as we talk about these themes over the next 4 weeks, we recognize that only God can give these. Hope, peace, joy and love are gifts, given at the coming of Jesus Christ. And once received, we act on them. This morning, our reflection is on hope. And we have two classic Advent texts for our reflection. The first is from Isaiah 11:1-10, and as with the poetry of the prophets, we are invited to use our imaginations and visualize what is proclaimed here.

## **Isaiah 11:1-10**

A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup> The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

<sup>3</sup> His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;

<sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall bring justice to the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

<sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

## **Romans 8:18-25**

<sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

A few weeks ago I attended a webinar (online seminar) on leadership in a liminal season. The actual title of the workshop was, "How to lead when you don't know where you're going," which is more of an accurate title. The workshop leader worked with this idea of liminality; of being in a liminal time and season. "Liminal" simply means "in between." But here is the full definition we were given, and see if this doesn't describe for us where we have been, and are right now: "Liminality is a quality of ambiguity and disorientation that occurs in transitory situations and spaces, when a person or people is betwixt and between something that has ended, and a new situation not yet begun." Does that fairly well describe things right now? We've actually been in a liminal time before covid-19 hit, before the presidential election and that whole transition. Our world has been going through one of those every-500-year culture shifts for a few decades, actually; it's just that the pandemic and politics and racial issues have magnified for us that we are indeed living through a liminal season.

In Celtic Christianity (an expression of Christianity that I love), the word they use for this is, threshold. These can be threshold *times and seasons* of being betwixt and between, whether individually or societally; we all have individual

threshold experiences during life (external transitions), and there are threshold places in creation—thin places, as they call them, where the veil between this world and the next is thin, or pulled back for a moment in our experience. The ancient Celts, and even modern practicing Celts, describe dawn, for example, as a threshold time each morning; and dusk, in the evening, as a threshold time. To pay attention and pray through each day. Standing on a beach is a threshold experience as land meets sea, a vast and mysterious body, that gives us pause for reflection. We all have threshold experiences on our inner journey as we grow and change during the seasons of our lives.

And during liminal times and seasons, or *threshold* times and experiences, what we need to have, and exercise, is hope. A trust that God is present, that God is at work, and that what lies ahead will be good, as we make a transition from what was, to what will be. Even if we have no idea what's happening in the moment. Or what the future will look like. Or how long it will take to get there.

As we hold onto hope, practice hope, and think about hope, remember that in the Bible the word hope is also the same word for “wait” and also the word for “trust.” So, to hope is to wait, to wait is to trust. To trust is to hope. You heard that in our reading from Romans as those words were used interchangeably.

Another good example is from Isaiah 40: “Those who hope/wait/trust in the Lord shall renew their strength...”

And so, what is needed at this time is a lot of trust in God, a lot of waiting for God (patience), and a hope in God that has confidence that God will work all things together for good, at the right time.

So, therefore, an important aspect of having hope is the ability to release our expectation of specific outcomes, on specific timelines. We have to leave outcomes to God. We have to leave the timing of things to God. We do our part: pray, listen, do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; this is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. We do all of those things that we are clearly told to do. But we don’t force anything in terms of outcomes. We let God show up when and how God wants to show up, we live in the flow of the movements of the Spirit of God, and we act in ways that show our trust in the goodness of God.

Liminal time is not a time to hurry up, or try to “fix” anything. That’s like trying to ‘fix’ a plant that is still growing and hasn’t bloomed before its time, or trying to ‘fix’ a pregnancy mid-term. There is nothing to fix. There is only patience, trust, waiting, and doing the appropriate and life-giving things during

the waiting time. In hope and confidence that something beautiful is coming (the flower, the child) at the right time. There's an old saying: "It takes 9 months to have a baby, no matter how many people you put on the job."

I have learned to love this short series of phrases, and I have it written down at the top of my to-do list: show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, release the outcome. I put this at the top of my list, lest I try too hard to fix or control outcomes.

Show up—be fully present. Don't be half-hearted, don't check out; check in!

Pay attention—be aware, notice what's going on around you and look for patterns and observe providential circumstances. This requires us slowing down in our mind, and engaging our environment from a place of inner stillness.

Cooperate with God—when you are aware of God at work in you or around you, don't resist it; join it! Even if it is different or uncomfortable. If you are unsure, talk with others about it and test it out to see if it's a Holy Spirit nudge and you are asked to cooperate with God about something. And then...

Release the outcome—resist the temptation to fix, or make something happen just because. God will do what God will do when God will do it!

Our hope is in *God*, not in outcomes. Because God's outcomes are usually better, often surprising, and more beneficial for everyone involved. And God seems to be at work most often during liminal, or threshold times. Just like the ocean is more active at the turning of the tide, whether the tide is ebbing or flowing. Because things get stirred up at the turn of the tide. Same thing during liminal, or threshold seasons. Things are stirred up, people are more open, and God just seems to show up in new and surprising ways. Wonderful ways. Even if it is a little messy (like the ocean floor when the tide changes).

Ancient Israel was in a liminal, or threshold time when the prophets had gone silent. For 400 years! That was the period of time between Malachi and Matthew—the last book of the old testament and the last prophet heard from, and the first book of the New Testament. Can you imagine?! 400 years of liminal time when God had gone silent, in the people's eyes and ears.

The Greek empire was declining and the Roman empire was expanding and tightening its crushing grip on Palestine. It was a time of social and political upheaval and violence, religious pluralism and turmoil and even religious violence (there were revolts and attempts at purification of those who were deemed as unclean or evil). And it was during this liminal, in-between time that the angel

Gabriel appeared to Mary, in a thin-place experience on the fuzzy edge of things, and announced that God had a plan, and that she would be part of it if she was willing. Mary showed up, was paying attention, cooperated with God, and released the outcome. No one could've seen that coming!

And like Mary, during liminal/threshold times we can open ourselves up in new ways, and imagine new possibilities. This is what the prophets of old did. We heard it from Isaiah: the wolf will live with lamb, along with calves and lions and baby goats—this sounds unrealistic, but this is prophetic imagination that says, with God all things are possible. Just like Gabriel said to Mary.

Along those lines I think of JRR Tolkien (a devout Catholic) who wrote the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings trilogy starting in 1937, and finished them in the mid-1940's; and CS Lewis (who became a Christian as an adult, and affiliated with the Anglican church in England) who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia series starting in 1939 on through the mid 1940's. Anything going on in the world from the mid 1930's to the mid 1940's?!?

All of these fantasy stories were stories of hope, written during the rise of fascism in Europe and throughout the second world war. They are stories about everyday characters who overcome fear (who take courage!) and hold onto hope

in the midst of terrible evil and major setbacks on their journeys. But no matter how bad things looked, they hung in there, each played their part, believing that good will win, in spite of not knowing what the heck they were doing or where their journey would lead them.

Tolkien and Lewis wrote these stories as a way of saying, we have to exercise hope no matter how bad things look. God will prevail; good will prevail. They wrote them almost as a way of thumbing their nose at evil, and telling their readers: hang in there! Do what you can do in expressing your hope, but don't despair.

Tolkien is quoted as saying: "Despair is hubris, because we think we know what the outcome will be, but we don't." In the words of Gandalf (Tolkien), the wise and benevolent wizard from Lord of the Rings: "Not even the wise know all ends." So we have to trust that God will work all things together for good, in his time.

GK Chesterton (who wrote a few decades before them, and at the time of World War 1): "As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude. It is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength at all. Like all the Christian virtues, it is as unreasonable as it is indispensable."

What does having hope look like for you right now? What does waiting look like for you? And trusting.

I'd like to focus our attention on the Advent wreath for a moment.

Hope is not merely a wish for things to get better, and soon. It is the confidence that the darkness will not have the last word. Hope is living in the confidence of the brightness of a new dawn. And the dawn is something that God brings about in a span of time that we do not control.

Hope is what is behind the Advent wreath. It's an almost foolish expectation of the coming of light. Each week as we move toward the darkest day of the year, and when the year will come to a close, we light an additional candle. This annual practice gives witness to the truth that darkness cannot extinguish the dawn of God's light.

Advent turns encroaching darkness into an invitation to hope. Light is coming, and darkness cannot overcome it. So, light a candle (or flip one on). Look toward the now dark horizon, and live into the expectation of the dawn of God's light.

Benediction from Romans 15:13: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. And all God's children said...