

Hope in Liminal Seasons

Isaiah 11:1-6 Romans 8:18-25

In our liturgy for Advent we are following the traditional themes of the 4 Sundays of Advent: hope, peace, joy, and love (following the banners around the sanctuary). I love these words, and what they represent. 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 try to muster up and possess. These are all embodied in Jesus Christ at his coming: Jesus is hope; Jesus is peace; Jesus is joy; Jesus is love.

And so, as we observe and take in these themes during the Advent season, we recognize that hope, peace, joy and love are gifts, given at the coming of Jesus Christ. And when received, we act on them. We, too, embody hope, peace, joy, and love in the world, and for the world. These are the traditional themes of Advent.

This morning, we have two traditional Advent *texts* for our reflection. The first, which we heard, is from Isaiah 11:1-6. The second one from Romans 8, which doesn't sound like a traditional Advent text, but has been for centuries, speaks to the central and pervasive Biblical theme of hope. Of longing and anticipation.

Romans 8:18-25

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that 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. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and 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. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But 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!

During Covid shutdown (remember that?, when we were sheltering in place?) I attended a webinar (an 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. Every 4 years we experience a liminal time after the election and before inauguration, wondering *what* will change and *how* it will change. But this particular liminal season contains more “ambiguity and disorientation” than usual.

As I’ve mentioned from time to time, our world has been going through one of those every-500-year culture shifts, and we’ve been experiencing that shift for a few decades, actually. It’s just that the pandemic and our politics and social issues have magnified for us that we are indeed living through a liminal season.

In Celtic Christianity (an expression of Christianity that I love, which developed on the margins of the Roman empire in Scotland and Ireland, which therefore escaped the institutionalization of Christianity by the Roman church in the 3rd and 4th centuries, and therefore was able to keep the heart of Christianity as a *movement* and not an institution), the word they use for this is, *threshold*. There are threshold *times and seasons* of being betwixt and between, whether individually or societally. We all have individual threshold experiences during life (external transitions in our lives where we cross a threshold from one station in

life to another), and there are threshold places in creation—thin places, as they're called, where the veil between this world and the next is thin, or pulled back for a moment in our experience. The ancient Celts, and 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 during that time and season, 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. To trust is to

wait. You heard that in our reading from Romans as those words were used interchangeably. Another good example is from the well-known passage in Isaiah 40: “Those who hope/wait/trust in the Lord shall renew their strength...”

And so, what is needed at times like we’re living through, 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 and follow God’s will—the *clear and revealed* will of God, as spoken in Scripture, like: “love your neighbor.” “Be quick to 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 you in Christ Jesus.” We do all of those things that we are told to do which are clear and unequivocal. *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.

I have a short series of phrases that I refer to from time to time to remind myself of all of this, and when I make a new to-do list (I’m an avid list-maker) I sometimes write it down at the top of my to-do list. The 4 short phrases are: show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, release the outcome. I sometimes 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! Show up.

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, and awareness. Pay attention, be present.

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 being asked to cooperate with God about something. And then...

Release the outcome—Resist the temptation to fix, control, or make something happen just because. God will do what God will do when God will do it! And we will often find that this happens in community, as we discover that God is leading others in the same way. We will find each other.

Our hope is in *God*, not in outcomes. Our hope is in *God*, not in outcomes. Because God's outcomes, when they come, are often surprising, and not what we expected, and they are more beneficial for everyone involved. And God seems to be at work 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—Malachi being the last book of the Old Testament and the last prophet heard from, and Matthew, 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.

During those centuries, the Greek empire was declining and the Roman empire was expanding and tightening its 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 religious purification of those who were deemed as unclean or evil. Have you heard of the Maccabees? They were a family of zealous priests and had a strong following of Jewish puritans who revolted against the Romans and tried to purify the temple among other things; and they believed that violence was justified in their efforts. That's one example of what took place during that liminal time.

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! While others were trying to force outcomes, God, with Mary's cooperation, was doing a new thing.

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 at work that says, with God all things are possible. Just like Gabriel said to Mary.

Along those lines of prophetic imagination, I remind us 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.

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 and hold onto hope and trust 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 as a way of thumbing their nose at evil, and telling their readers: hang in there! Do what you can do in living into your hope, but don't despair.

I've quoted this before and it's worth repeating: after the Lord of the Rings trilogy was published and Tolkien was interviewed about the resilience of the characters in the story he said: "Despair is hubris, because we think we know what the outcome will be, but we don't." In the words of Gandalf, 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, 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? Or, we can frame it in terms of the question:

how am I doing at showing up, paying attention, cooperating with God, and releasing outcomes?

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 as gospel writer John tells us. 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.

Ann Lamott: "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up."

Paul ends his letter to the Romans with these words—a benediction that hearkens back to the reading we heard from Romans 8 (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...

If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee