

A SONG OF HOPE

Isaiah 2:1-5

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I am going to try to talk about a movie without completely spoiling it for you, because I hope you'll see it (if you haven't already). The film is about the life of a man in Sweden; the man's name is Ove. He is somewhere over 60, retirement age, and if I had to sum up his life in one word, that word would be "despair." The premise of the first half of the movie is that Ove has nothing to live for. His life, at one point, had meaning and purpose and joy but those sources of happiness are now gone, and nothing has replaced them. If Ove is like anyone in the Bible, it would be a Pharisee, someone who cares about rules and who obsesses about other people following the law to the letter. Ove reminds me of the people my husband and I call the "condo police", those people in our neighborhood who love to find the neighbors who are breaking the rules of our neighborhood association, doing utterly despicable things like operating a grill in their driveway - instead of in the back which is the only place they're allowed. You know people like that, don't you? Those who find pleasure in tattling on others? Ove is like that, except that even turning in the rule-breakers doesn't give him pleasure. Nothing does.

But over the course of the movie, Ove's neighbors begin to express a need for him. They notice skills and talents that he has, and they ask for his help. He gives that help grudgingly at first, but little by little he begins to feel once more. He is drawn into the lives of others, and as you watch the film, you can almost see his heart expand and soften. By

the end, the character who started gruff and grouchy has learned how to love again. It's a deeply hopeful story which I commend to you. Its message is simple, yet one of which we need to be reminded.

It is so tempting to live in negativity, to focus on all that is wrong in the world - whether we're looking at global problems, national problems, or whether we're focused on the challenges of our personal lives. There's something perversely comforting about complaining. Maybe it causes us to feel less responsible - like if we just keep on listing all of the problems, no one will expect us to do anything about any of them...Feeling sorry for ourselves, self-pity, licking our wounds - saying "poor me" - it's easy to fall into those patterns.

But God's word turns us around and points us in a different direction. "Go this way," God says, "Walk in the direction of hope." Throughout the Bible, we find this message. When there is a famine in the land and people who were once prosperous find themselves begging for food, God says, "Don't give up hope." Do you remember that story? Jacob and his sons have to come to the Pharaoh's house for grain and while they are there they become reunited with the youngest son Joseph who had been sold into slavery many years before. The one they thought was dead is the one who is now feeding them. It's a reversal of fortune, a story of hope.

When the people of Israel become slaves in Egypt, God says to them, "Hope will soon arrive." Hope does arrive in the form of a Hebrew baby, raised as a prince, who ends up leading his people into the promised land. It's a long journey, though, forty years through the wilderness. Moses was a great leader, but who can maintain hope in a wandering people for forty years? "Keep walking towards the promised land," God says,

along the way providing quail and manna to eat, a pillar of light to follow, and laws that create peaceful community.

“Don’t give up hope,” God says when later Israel is ransacked by Babylon and its people forced into exile. “This won’t last forever. While you’re here, even in a foreign land, you can still sing songs of faithfulness, and when you return home, you can rebuild your lives.”

Temples are destroyed, nations are besieged, but none of it takes away the promise of hope. Where God is, there is hope.

The word “hope” comes to us this Advent season. It is not a fantasy word, a Pollyanna word, a word that means that we pretend that things are better than they are. The Bible names the principalities and powers of its time. Let’s name ours. The planet is in peril. On our watch, the people of Syria have been starved and murdered. On the day we celebrated Thanksgiving, in some kind of horrible irony, Native Americans who are trying to protect their water rights were met with water cannons. We know the problems of our world. We know the problems of our lives. We struggle to maintain healthy relationships feeling all the while that there isn’t enough time for anything we need to do. Children develop cancer. Faithful employees lose their jobs. Life isn’t fair and it sure can be hard. Hope isn’t about pretending that these things don’t exist. It’s not about denial or covering up.

Hope looks reality in the eye and says, “I choose to believe that a better world is possible.”

The prophet Isaiah calls us to believe that God is about the work of bringing real change into the world, turning the world upside down until there is peace and justice. And if we look, we can find places and people who are making God's hope and vision real.

Let me tell you about the African nation of Liberia. It experienced a 14-year brutal civil war, killing 200,000 people and displacing 1/3 of its citizens. Women bore the brunt of the suffering; they were assaulted and abused and had to watch their young sons be forcibly recruited for military service. In April of 2003 a group of Liberian women launched a non-violent campaign for peace; several of the leaders of the movement were Christian women who were determined to find common ground with Muslim women. And they did. Through mass peaceful protests, through dialogue with both sides, using every tactic they could think of, these women persisted. At one point there was a group of women lying down on the ground, all dressed in white, refusing to move, embarrassing the president. Another time they linked arms around a government building until peace talks started back up again. The tragic civil war in Liberia finally came to an end. Swords were turned into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

Let me tell you about Shane Claiborne. He is a Christian leader in inner-city Philadelphia who has started an intentional Christian community called the Simple Way. Inner-city Philadelphia sees nearly one gun death every day. Claiborne is determined to make a difference for good. He is a Bible-reader, and kept reading our passage for today. He decided to take it literally. He asked around the neighborhood, "Does anyone have a weapon they don't want anymore?" His first donation was an AK-47, an assault rifle. Claiborne has a friend who's a blacksmith and another one who's a welder. They, too, read the Bible and were ready to put its words into practice. That AK-47 is now a tool that

is used in the community garden at the Simple Way. What was once intended for death and destruction is now used for feeding people. Literally, a sword has become a plowshare and a spear a pruning hook. One assault rifle became a rake and a shovel; another became three hand trowels. Claiborne says this: "I'm convinced that one of the things we need a movement of is a movement of life, Christians and others who believe that every person is precious. For me, this didn't start as an issue, as a matter of politics. It started for me when a 19-year-old kid was killed on my front porch. I started thinking about how far that scene was from God's dream for the world. Let's re-imagine our country, let's re-imagine our world, because it doesn't have to stay the way it is."

Where do we see hope? Where do we find it? How do we make it real?

Perhaps some of you heard the same interview I did on NPR the day before Thanksgiving. I can't stop thinking about it. The interview was with Wissam Zarqa, who lives with his wife in rebel-held eastern Aleppo, in Syria. The teacher and activist explains to the reporter why he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Last week, the Syrian regime and its Russian allies resumed airstrikes on that part of the city. Witnesses are reporting that hospitals and schools have been hit. First, the reporter asked Mr. Zarqa if this increased bombing has brought daily life to a halt in the Syrian city. Let me read you a few of his questions and answers:

WISSAM ZARQA: No, no, like, even when a street is targeted, like, five minutes later, life would go back to normal somehow. People who live day by day can't stay at home. They have to work.

GREENE: And are you still going to work?

ZARQA: I'm a teacher. Because of the heavy shelling, we stopped this week. Hopefully, we can start again next week.

GREENE: How old are your students?

ZARQA: The youngest are 11.

GREENE: What have you been telling these young kids about the situation?

ZARQA: In fact, they are telling me - not I am telling them. They know better. Most of them spent all of their life - most of their life in this situation. So usually, they would, like, start - at class, they would tell me what happened, who died and how.

GREENE: Wow, they actually just tell you who died, like, in a very straightforward manner, like this is just - that they're used to this life.

ZARQA: The other day, a little girl in the seventh grade, she told me that she couldn't finish her homework because her brother was killed. It was in the same day, so I was surprised that her brother passed away but she came to school. So yeah, it's strange a bit. But this is how it's happening here.

GREENE: And you are living with your wife in eastern Aleppo right now. Is that right?

ZARQA: Right.

GREENE: And she's pregnant?

ZARQA: She was pregnant. And we lost our unborn baby about a month ago or less.

GREENE: Oh, I'm so sorry.

ZARQA: Yeah, we don't know why exactly, maybe because of the terror around - like, it happens many times that we wake up terrified, especially when they started using bunker buster bombs - maybe because of the lack of the food she needs. I'm not sure why, exactly. Maybe, like, even if we were, like, in a normal life, maybe that would happen. But you never can tell.

GREENE: Why are you in eastern Aleppo right now? I know you wrote an article saying that many of your family members - your parents and your brother and friends - live in Turkey. Why have you and your wife decided to stay in eastern Aleppo?

ZARQA: It's a duty. There are children here. There are young people who need education to go on. If all people who, like, have already finished their study run away, there would be no more life here - only death, only war. So I was in Saudi Arabia. I used to teach at university. It was comfortable there. But I didn't feel OK. I felt that there is something I should be doing, and I wasn't.

GREENE: Mr. Zarqa, let me just ask you - you know, our listeners hear day after day of how bleak and terrible the situation is in your part of Aleppo. I mean, what is your best hope at this point?

ZARQA: No idea - like, as for me, I wanted to be here no matter what. Maybe we will be killed today, tomorrow...So I prefer to die here, doing my duty. So I don't, like, have a lot of hopes about future. What I care about is the present. That all what matters.

He may not have hope, but he is living hope. He is bringing hope to the children he teaches. Surely, surely, some of them will survive and when they do, they will be educated. They will be hope-bearers to their children and to their own futures. We don't live in hope because life is easy. We live in hope because what matters is what we can do today, where we are right now, to share God's love with another human being.