

AN ADVENT MESSAGE OF HOPE

Isaiah 2:1-5

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Two years ago I received a very thoughtful Christmas gift from one of my relatives. Knowing how much I enjoy reading, he gave me a subscription for one book a month for a year - a brand new, just-published, hard cover book from a bookstore in New York. The bookstore selected the books. They were mostly from younger, newer authors. Some of them are books I might have picked up eventually - some were definitely not. I vowed that I would read every one of the 12 books — since we were still in the midst of pandemic lockdown for part of that time, it wasn't too difficult for me to do. I even thought I might write a summary of what I gleaned from a year of reading 12 books that were hot off the press.

But when I finished the twelfth book, though I was still immensely grateful for the gift, I found myself sobered and somewhat depressed. Several of the books were about environmental disasters, several of them were about the epidemic of loneliness. What I had been given that Christmas was not only twelve books, but a glimpse into the minds and hearts of thinkers and writers a generation or two younger than I.

Since then, I have paid more attention to what people in their forties, thirties and twenties are thinking. I have asked more questions of my younger colleagues, and my children, and their friends. Of course, there is huge variety of thought among every age span, but in general, this seems to be true.

In a recent study of people ages 16-25 in ten countries, including the United States, more than half said that worries about climate change made them feel afraid, sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless. They feel frightened about the future and do not feel that their

government leaders are doing enough - this sense that their concerns are not being taken seriously magnifies their feelings of doom and frustration. To many people in this age range, there is no more important issue. When it seems as if other generations **don't care at all** about what **they care most about**, they feel more alone and despairing.

So when I began thinking about a sermon on hope, about lighting the candle of hope this year, it was this group of people that I had on my mind and heart. First, I want them to know that we care. We care about the future of the world. And we care about them. Second, I want them to be able to live with hope, for how do any of us live without hope? Hope is essential to life, and to the Christian life. But this hope has to be **realistic**, it has to be muscular, it has to address the issues of our day.

You can debate whether or not this particular eon in history is the most dire ever. What we know for sure is that our ancestors of every generation faced their own crises. Our scripture passage for today takes us back to around 750 B.C. This is the time before Israel's exile—a time of worry, tumult, and uncertainty within Israel as their Assyrian neighbors began to aggressively expand their empire. Israel was a small and helpless nation compared to the giant and powerful Assyria, and its leaders and citizens were afraid of being invaded and captured. Isaiah begins his prophetic message with words of judgment about the fate of Israel, but in our passage for today - the second chapter of Isaiah - the tone is different and more positive. The prophet Isaiah turns from his more political messaging and speaks to the people about their spiritual lives. In the midst of a political and military crisis, people need spiritual guidance. "Imagine," Isaiah says, that **all the people on earth are walking towards the same mountain, because they're all seeking God**. Everyone needs God's wisdom and God's peace. It's what we're all longing to find. Once we receive God's instruction, we won't need our weapons anymore. Once we see each other on top of the mountain, and realize our common humanity, once

we view each other as brothers and sisters, all united in our love for God, well, we won't want to fight each other anymore."

The very first verse of our passage for today is remarkable. It says, "This is what Isaiah **saw** concerning Israel and Jerusalem"...Isaiah received this vision of a mountain...a mountain where all people meet, a mountain of unity, a mountain of peace. He wasn't just describing something to try to placate people or encourage them. No, this is a **vision**, a **gift of imagination**. This is the kind of dream that has to be shared. Another way of life is possible, Isaiah is saying. It's possible for us to focus less on our differences and more on what we have in common. It's certainly possible for us to learn from God's wisdom, to set aside our own arrogance, the idea that we already know everything, and return to God's teachings. How do we do it? The last verse says, "Let us walk in the light of God." In other words, we do it **one step at a time** - the way we do everything important, the way all changes are made.

Throughout the Bible, God's people are called to a particular, peculiar way of life - a life that acknowledges the reality of the problems of this world but a life that has one foot in another realm. I'm not talking about heaven or the after life - the Bible really doesn't have a lot to say about that. What the Bible **does** describe is the world as it would look if we all lived the way that God intended. What would the world look like if there was no poverty? What would the world be like if we all cared for widows and orphans and refugees? What would it be like to live in a world of health and wholeness, where everyone had a chance to live into their God-given potential? We are asked to never lose sight of that world, because as long as we can glimpse it, we can work towards its reality. What would it feel like to live in a world where no one had to worry about getting shot at Walmart the day before Thanksgiving? What would it feel like to live in a world where schools and universities and all houses of worship were safe sanctuaries? What would it feel like to

live in a world where everyone could socialize and experience joy without fear of yet another mass shooting? We cannot give up hope. This is not the world God has in mind for us.

Our calling is to keep dreaming, keep imagining that better world. Let us be open to receiving visions of how we might make this broken world a place of beauty and compassion and justice. One writer calls this way of living “as if” living. Here’s how she puts it - “We make the hard decision to undergo the chemo and radiation, not knowing if the misery will be worth it, but **as if it will**. We decide not to drink today, not knowing if we’ll be able to do the same tomorrow, but trusting we’ll get sober one day at a time. We reach out to that person who’s angry with us, **as if forgiveness is possible**. We work for racial justice, **as if both hearts and systems can be changed**. We care for creation, **as if** the worst of the climate crisis is not inevitable. We live as if God’s imagined realm can become a reality.

This week’s Advent theme is Hope, and the prophet’s vision of the coming world for which we hope is itself a portrait of peace — and next week’s theme is Peace. And if we follow this line of thought, the whole movement of the Advent season opens up for us, like a Hope-Peace-Joy-Love choreography. This week, we hope. Hope for what? Peace! How do we feel when peace arrives? Joy! And what action both flows from joy and helps sustain it? Love!

A friend of mine is working through some momentous changes in his life and it’s easy for him to feel paralyzed when he thinks about all the steps he’ll need to take. When we talked the other day, I encouraged him to take one step at a time. What’s the next right thing you need to do? Do you know how to walk any other way? Walking is always one step at a time. Eventually we arrive at our destination, and along the way, we meet

companions. We realize we're not alone. The friendship of fellow travelers keeps us going.

The writer Henri Nouwen says that Christian community equips us to live with courage, trusting that there is spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and overwhelmed by the problems of the world.

When we think about crises in modern human history, few compare to the magnitude of the Holocaust. In the last several years I have found myself turning again and again to books and memoirs written about Holocaust survivors and especially those who participated in the resistance. Their lives inspire me to do all I can to courageously resist the evils of our own day. One man I learned about recently is Alfred Delp - he was a Christian leader of the resistance who eventually was arrested and died in prison. During his time in prison he wrote, and one of his favorite topics was the Advent season. It is not hard to imagine disillusionment outweighing hope for Delp as he reflected on Advent—that the promise of a light that would shine brightly among the nations would sound hollow while sitting in a prison cell, or that the promise of a peace that would pass all understanding would sound foolish in the midst of the Second World War. And yet hope rings out loudly in his writings, punctuated only by his pleas for each of us to work to bring our hopes into being. “If Advent is to truly come again,” he writes, “then the great Advent question for us is whether we come out of these convulsions with this determination: yes, arise. It is time for each of us to go to work.” Trapped in a prison cell, separated from his community and family in one of the most horrific periods in human history, Delp believed in the necessity of faithful living, day by day, step by step.

Shortly before he died, he wrote, “light your candles, such candles as you possess, wherever you are.” We all have different roles to play in spreading the soft, gentle light

found at the manger at the end of this season—but our work, our voice, and our love is urgent and vital.

We keep hope alive, for ourselves and others, when we engage in acts of compassion and welcome, love and justice. Hope may appear as we take an ornament from the giving tree and shop for someone else this Christmas season. Hope may appear as we prepare a dessert that will be enjoyed by those living at the Haven Center homeless shelter. Hope may appear as we invite the one we know is lonely to our Christmas dinner table. Through individual acts of generosity and through all that we are able to do together, we are keeping hope alive, lighting one more candle, all in the name of the one who envisions a better world for all. Amen.

Resources:

A sermon preached by Matthew Helms at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

UCC Daily Devotional written by Vicki Kemper

The Salt Project