

Dare to Hope: A Message for Advent

Laurel Robinson
Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC
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Several years ago, as December approached, an increasing sense of melancholy crept over me. The anniversary of my mother's death was on December 18. The birthday of my beloved oldest sister, Marily, who died in 2014, was on December 9. And our sweet old dog Fred had died on December 4, also in 2014. I had bittersweet memories of my father's last Christmas, when he was released from the hospital so we could all be together. I remembered him lying in bed as he talked to my two-year-old nephew and watched him play with a balloon.

I also remembered happier Christmases, when our family would gather at my parents' house in Missouri and sit by the fire doing jigsaw puzzles and playing board games while munching on Dad's homemade Chex Mix. We always took a drive around town to look at Christmas lights, and on Christmas night, we'd go to a local bowling alley for our annual tournament, called Bowling for Small Appliances, followed by a late-night breakfast at Waffle House. Saying goodbye to that era felt like yet another loss. It seemed like the losses were piling up, and I had too many sad associations with December.

The next year and the year after that, that same sense of flatness and melancholy came over me as we moved through Thanksgiving and into December. Really, I just wanted Christmas to be over with. *Okay, I thought finally. I'm not even 60 years old yet. I don't want to start dreading Christmas, and I don't think God wants me to, either. Ideally, I've got a lot of Christmases still ahead of me. How can I make this better? What have I loved about Christmas in the past, and how can I salvage it this year and in the future?*

Soon I was in my red apron in the kitchen, where I cranked up the Christmas music on my CD player and went into a baking frenzy that lasted for days: I made bon bons and biscotti and miniature cheesecakes and butter cookies with peppermint buttercream filling; sweet and spicy pecans and decorated chocolate stars and bells and Christmas trees and bears made with my grandmother's and mother's cookie cutters. I sent boxes of goodies to my family and signed up for coffee fellowship and delivered plates of treats to friends.

I took some tags from the Christmas Giving Tree and went to the Ellsworth Walmart, where I spent a good 10 minutes laughing with an older gentleman as we helped each other find just the right men's sweatpants to give as gifts. On the way home I belted out "Feliz Navidad" along with José Feliciano on the radio. I went through the Dunkin Donuts drive-thru and paid for the car

behind me. Small acts, all of them, but they lightened my heart and gave me hope that I'd be able to find meaning and joy in Christmas again.

Well, here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, which happens to fall on Christmas Eve this year. Instead of hearing about Mary and Joseph traveling those final miles to Bethlehem, about the innkeeper and the stable and friendly beasts, this morning's Gospel reading is about this wacky guy in camel's-hair clothing out in the desert, telling people that they need to repent and get ready for something new. John the Baptist sounds a bit like the street preacher who used to hang out on the busy corner across from my apartment in Seattle.

Where is the Virgin Mary, the donkey who carries her, the stoic, silent, good-guy Joseph? For that part of the story, you'll have to come to the 6 p.m. service. For now, we are still preparing, just as some of us may still have some preparing to do before tonight and tomorrow.

You may remember that the four themes for the four Sundays in Advent are hope, peace, love, and joy, and although the order of them is flexible, most churches place hope in the first or second Sunday. For a couple of reasons, Centre Street's Worship Planning Team and worship speakers decided we needed to shift hope to the fourth Sunday of Advent this year, and although it felt a little odd to me at first, the truth is that hope runs throughout Advent, and that without it, peace, love, and joy are harder to come by. Jesus' birth is the birth of the hope that makes peace, love, and joy possible. Ultimately, his ministry shows us that we are not stuck, that we can change, that the world can be different.

Hope is a big concept, and I admit I'd never given it much thought until I knew I'd be talking about it today. I certainly don't have it figured out; I feel like I'm just now getting glimpses into what hope really means to Christians. What I found over and over again when preparing for today is that Advent hope has some distinctive features.

First, hope is what leads us from the past to the present and future. By its very definition, hope usually looks forward. In this morning's passage from Mark, we have John the Baptist echoing the words of Isaiah, saying, "Prepare the way. Get ready. You don't want to miss this. God is about to do a new thing." Like all prophets, John is telling people to wake up, that there's more than what is right in front of us. And the future is going to be different.

Second, hope usually implies action. Hope inspires us to work with God and be God's hands and feet in the world even when what we do seems tiny in the face of so much suffering and so many problems. Barbara Brown Taylor has said that John the Baptist expected a lot of Jesus and his ministry; he thought God would work through Jesus to clean up the world and things would move pretty quickly. He expected a tidal wave of change. "What John got instead," Taylor says, "was a steady drip of mercy" from Jesus. Indeed, Jesus often healed one person or a few people

at a time: the woman who was hemorrhaging; ten lepers; two blind men. And in the verses from Isaiah, which Becky read to us, we're asked to comfort each other, assure each other of God's presence. Hope is found in such small acts of kindness and love.

At the time this passage from Isaiah was written, most of the Israelites had been in captivity in Babylon for nearly fifty years. They were grieving the loss of their homeland, which had been destroyed by foreign armies. They were suffering and were afraid God had abandoned them. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, came this prophet who said God hadn't forgotten them, that God had been with them all along.

Like the ancient Israelites, we sometimes wonder if God has left us. It's easy to fall into despair when we're feeling overwhelmed and cannot see how things will ever get better. I had lunch with two business friends on Thursday, and both of them said they have stopped watching the news and reading newspapers. Not because they don't care about the fighting between Russia and Ukraine and what's happening in Israel and Gaza, not because they don't care about the number of people experiencing homelessness, and not even because they're scared of climate change. They no longer keep abreast of the news because they have given up on the idea of people ever learning to live in harmony with each other and the earth.

I suspect that even if they wouldn't use these words, they feel like God has thrown up God's hands and said, "Forget it. I'm out of here. You're on your own." Yet we hear in these readings that not only has God never left us, but God is sending us someone who will show us how change is possible. God holds out hope for us even when we don't.

A third characteristic of Advent hope is that it is different from optimism and magical thinking. Optimism is about attitude. Optimism is about rose-colored glasses. Often, it suggests not seeing the situation as it is but as we wish it could be. Our faith doesn't make us immune from bad things happening to us and our loved ones. But unlike optimism, hope is not passive. Being hopeful doesn't mean sitting back and waiting for God or someone else to take care of a problem. And hope is grounded in reality. It acknowledges the current situation, in all its brokenness and with all its limitations, while looking toward the future and how it can be different—and then it inspires us to action.

Hope is different from magical thinking. I indulge in magical thinking when I tell myself I'm going to have all my Christmas cards written by the end of the Thanksgiving weekend while still running my business full time and continuing with my other activities and obligations. In other words, I'm going to have those cards done without actually carving out the time to write them.

In addition to those features of hope, pastors and writers Nadia Bolz-Weber and Jake Owensby say hope has an element of defiance about it. Hope insists that a light will not, cannot, be

overcome by darkness. Hope says God is not done with us and is still writing our story. Hope allows us to dare to believe that God loves us even with our mistakes, our shame, our neglectfulness, and the ways we have disappointed our loved ones and ourselves. Armed with hope, we have the courage to believe that darkness and despair are not all there is, and they are not the end.

Hope rolls up its sleeves—or puts on its apron, as it were—and gets to work. Hope compels us to ask God how we can help relieve suffering, stand up for those who are oppressed, tend to our own wounds, work on healing this precious planet. Hope allowed me to be truthful about my sadness many years ago and insist on lighting a candle against my own darkness. It helped me say, *I will not let my Christmases be just about grieving the past. I will work with God to make the future better.*

In his blog, Jake Owensby writes about visiting a community near Atlanta that he describes as being “in the grips of desperate poverty. Weathered houses, dilapidated trailers, and decaying RVs line the narrow streets. Roofs leak. In spots floors have given way. Some dwellings have no running water. There are no bus stops and many residents must go by foot. The only place to buy groceries is an overpriced convenience store with bars on the doors and windows.

“In the midst of this bone-crushing poverty, we spotted a single-wide mobile home with a makeshift stoop. Perched on that stoop was a battered, lopsided Frosty the Snowman. At the sight of Frosty, I sensed a hope that could not be extinguished. In a simple decoration I heard another human being cry, ‘I believe that there is more than this. These circumstances will not crush me, and they certainly will not determine my children’s future.’ That kind of resistance, that kind of hope, does not arise merely from inner personal resolve. This is heaven-infused grit. God is at work in this person, whether she realizes it or not. In the simple act of putting Frosty out on her stoop, she has gotten busy joining God in turning this world upside down.”

I love that: She has gotten busy joining God in turning this world upside down. “Her act of resistance is more than a holiday dream,” Owensby concludes. “It’s Christmas hope.”

One of the gifts of writing this morning’s message is that it has encouraged me to look for signs of hope in my own daily life. And the idea that hope is not an attitude so much as it is something we do, that it’s a way of participating in God’s work, has me intrigued. Where do you see hope this Advent season? What do you hope for, and what do you think God hopes for you? My prayer is that Jesus’ birth will renew the light of hope in each of us. Amen.

Sources

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