

“Hope Can’t Wait”
Isaiah 2:1-5

Pastor Liz Miller
December 2, 2019

Sometimes - and maybe not everyone feels this way- but sometimes, it feels like we don't know what to do with Advent. It's a season of anticipation, of reflection, and of waiting for Christ to be born. But what does anticipation and waiting look like in real life? How do we practice that and experience it together? There were times in the church's history when we understood waiting more in terms of what we couldn't do than in what we could do. So Advent became about being adamant that “it's not Christmas yet” instead of naming what it is. Instead of an invitation to experience something sacred and holy, it felt more like chastising for not doing Advent right or not slowing down enough or not waiting until December 24th to catch the Christmas spirit.

Advent is not supposed to be a season of feeling bad about ourselves or the church or a season when we are so busy being pious that we miss all the merriment around us. Advent is supposed to be infused with holy holiday spirit as we prepare for Christmas. All those traditions that have built up in anticipation of Christmas - cookie swaps, decking the halls, caroling, school concerts and dance recitals, Variety Show Extravaganzas, open houses, reuniting with loved ones - all of those help us anticipate the arrival of Christmas with all our senses.

There are smells associated with this season - fresh baked cookies and evergreen trees. There are sounds and sights we see only in December - songs that echo in our ears, nativity crèches on our mantles. The sparkling lights in our trees make us want to reach out and touch them, to feel the pine needles run through our fingers. These tell us that Christmas is on its way,

and for us as practicing Christians, they have become cultural touchstones of Advent, ritualized practices that help us anticipate and prepare for what is to come.

In our congregation, we honor many of these rituals. We've decked the halls. We'll go Christmas caroling later this month. We slowly weave in our favorite songs into worship throughout the month. We have a giant cookie party on Christmas Eve after worship that sometimes goes to midnight. We do this because even as we wait to see what will happen when Christ is born on Christmas day, we **know** what happened when Christ was born so long ago. We know the deep impact and transformation his birth had and continues to have on our world, and so we don't pretend to be ignorant to the power of Christmas. Instead, we embrace the idea that part of Advent is letting Christmas and Christ's birth seep into our hearts and minds, little by little throughout the month.

In addition to these rituals, Advent is also a time to ground ourselves in our faith. As we anticipate and wait for Christ's birth, we think about what it meant when God came down, in the flesh, fully human and fully divine. What did it mean that God was embodied by a tiny brown vulnerable baby born to an unwed mother and a working class father, born far away from home, soon to be political refugees? What did it mean then and what does it mean for us now? And as we wait for Christmas, what can't wait? What do we know too much about in this Christmas story for us to put off any longer or to press pause on for the next month?

This month, one of the ways the church prepares for and anticipates Christmas is by grounding ourselves in the cornerstones of our shared faith, cornerstones that appear in the Christmas story of Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and angels. We ground ourselves in the feelings they would have experienced as they anticipated Jesus' birth: hope, peace, joy, and love. These are the things we understand can't wait any longer and can't be held off until Christmas Eve. For

each of the four weeks of Advent we lift up one of these cornerstones, immersing ourselves in it through practice, prayer, and reflection. We try it on for ourselves, in the church and in our lives. We name the ways in which we see it already present in our lives and then we dig deeper to recommit ourselves to it, knowing that hope, peace, joy, and love are values that will carry us not just through this particular season, but have the power to ground us and guide us all year long.

This first week of Advent is all about hope. To be honest, it feels like we start with the hardest week first. If I asked you to come up with an image of joy, peace, or love I bet you instantly have a memory or an idea that comes to mind. But hope is a little harder to conjure up in a concrete way. It feels more mystical. It feels like you know it when you have it, but it can be harder to grasp from a distance.

Part of this is because hope has a very close relationship to despair. And we often do our best to turn away from despair or hide it from view instead of staring it in the face and challenging it. Hope comes from a place of despair - it comes when we transform the world as it is and imagine something new in its place.

The passage we read from Isaiah is a vision of hope. It is God's vision for the world, of all the nations uniting together as one, of turning away from violence and beating their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. This is a vision of turning tools of destruction and pain into tools that cultivate the land and nurture creation. God's vision for the future of humanity is one where there is no more war. There are no more borders. There is only one people, united and committed to helping everyone thrive as equals. That is a profound vision of hope.

And where does it come from? In the chapter before this in Isaiah, the prophet describes the world as it was: it describes the world as unfaithful and corrupt. It says the rulers of the

nations are companions of thieves. The rulers of these nations love bribes and chase wealth instead of serving people. The rulers of these nations do not defend the orphan, do not care for the widows. It describes God as being angry at the state of the world, of wanting to turn away from the corruption and violence, but instead God commits to working for justice alongside those people who are righteous, who have not succumbed to corruption and a thirst for power. It is these people who receive God's vision and are the bearers of hope.

This vision of hope becomes meaningful when we know what it grew from and rose against. Poet Seamus Heaney calls this the meeting point of hope and history, where what has happened is met by what we make of it. This intersection is where we find ourselves this first week in Advent. We know the injustices of this world. We do not have to look too far away to see corruption and violence and power imbalances. But what, as people of faith, is our vision for how the world should be? What is our vision of hope? Once we can name that vision, we know our call: to work for hope and let hope guide us forward into a world where God's vision of one people together, rejecting violence and war, of caring for the most vulnerable amongst us, reigns.

Hope is not passive. It is not a wish. It is not naïve optimism. Hope is resistance. It is words of love spoken in resistance to a narrative of hate. It is actions of peace taken in resistance to violence and apathy. Is it communities caring for our children, our elders, our vulnerable populations and reimagining shared power in resistance to isolation and greed and corrupt power. Hope requires working for God's vision for all people, of understanding the obstacles, setbacks, and heartaches that we will surely face when we turn against the status quo or challenge institutions and individuals who seek to keep things the way they are, but committing to the work of the vision anyway.

Hope is about resisting despair. I ask each of us on this first day of Advent, what present despair and dismay is blurring your vision? What is breaking your heart? What have you seen in this world and thought, “That’s not right. It shouldn’t be this way.” How can we look beyond the despair to live into the “not yet”? What actions can we take to embody hope - to work for God’s vision for all people on earth, indeed for all of creation - to resist despair?

Rev. Victoria Stafford writes in her essay, “The Small Work in the Great Work,”

“Once you have glimpsed the world as it might be, as it ought to be, as it’s going to be (however that vision appears to you), it is impossible to live compliant and complacent anymore in the world as it is... And so you come out and walk out and march, the way a flower comes out and blooms, because it has no other calling. It has no other work.”

The prophet Isaiah spoke of God’s vision of turning swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. What is God’s vision for our world today? What needs transforming? This vision is our call in Advent and as Christians throughout the whole year. Hope is the actions, words, and movements we take toward this vision. Hope our ongoing, faith filled, transformative resistance to despair. Hope can’t wait.