

December 8, 2019
2 Advent, Year A
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A God of Hope

In my deeper conversations with the people I have worked with in different congregations, we often find our way to questions about the church and faith and what is essential to believe to be a Christian. Usually the desire expressed is to be a “good” Christian or a “faithful” person.

The back and forth can go like this: I was raised in the church because my parents thought it was a good thing, fell away sometime after Sunday School and confirmation. Never really connected much with the institutional church. Some of the scandals and the shady TV evangelists turned me off. I’m not sure what I think about the laundry list of things that are said right after the sermon in the Creed. Sounds like a lot of things I have to believe in and I’m not quite sure what it really means to my daily life: to believe in one Lord “eternally begotten of the Father” who “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

At this point, as the one listening, I might say: “I hear you, go on.” The conversation is likely to continue like this: But I know that I feel better when I’m grounded in something solid, that’s been around for a long time, that is not a passing fad, and coming to a Sunday service helps me feel better. Not sure why always. I know I need more silence and less noise in my life. Life seems so busy and I can’t seem to get here to church as much as I’d like. Is that O.K.? – coming once in a while? I nod. “Keep talking...”

This imagined or real person might say: I may not believe in all the church doctrines and dogmas, but I want to live a good life, make a difference, be kind to others, not judge, accept people for who they are. I’m concerned with what is going on in the world out there – a lot of negative energy right now – and sometimes I just want my small part of the universe to be something I can wrap my arms around and keep out all the bad. The prayers I pray are mostly about my family – my kids or my parents – and for the healing of people I know and love going through some really bad health crises, and I’m worried for them. So, I pray in my own way, and hope that things are going to be O.K.

Finally, this person – in this perhaps overly generalized pastoral conversation -- might turn to me and ask: does that sound normal to you? Which is when I can’t help but break a smile and respond: absolutely!

I posed a question last week on the first Sunday of advent. During this season of waiting and preparation, what do we expect when we are expecting the coming of Christ at Christmas? I heard it said once that to believe in miracles one has to expect something can happen.

The camel hair covered and locust and wild honey eating John the Baptist appears every 2nd Sunday of Advent. We do not get to Jesus born in Bethlehem before John. He was who Isaiah spoke about as the voice crying out in the wilderness, to be that clarion call for clearing the way for the one who would come. The one to come would be more powerful and worthy and his baptism would be of the Holy Spirit. John could draw a crowd, as people “people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan.” Matthew 3. Even many (v.7) Pharisees and Sadducees came to baptized.

What draws people far and wide to baptized in a river by a wooly and fiery character such as John the Baptist? They believe that their sins could be forgiven. That they could begin their lives in a new way, in new direction, in a direction pointed more towards God.

What draws us out of daily living, our so-called normal life -- to take stock of something beyond us and eternal? What can make us see our live and purpose in new ways? What draws us to a living worshipping community almost 2,000 years after the events we read about took place? How about... hope. Let me take a risk here and try speak for us all: we want to believe in hope.

You will notice that the word ‘hope’ is not found in the Creed that can be an obstacle for some, but neither is ‘love,’ ‘mercy,’ ‘justice,’ or ‘compassion.’ I think hope is one of reasons we gather here. The Oxford dictionary defines hope as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen.” What does it mean to live in hope? To be people of hope? It is a belief that everything is going to work out and all shall be well – is that it? Is it believing that love will prevail over hatred, light over darkness?

The late Vaclav Havel, was the first President of the Czech Republic and served for ten years. He was an author/playwright turned politician. He tells a story about the nature of hope after surviving a near death experience only months before taking office. (Originally published in Esquire's October 1993 issue).

He was in the countryside outside of Prague visiting some friends. After a feast by a bonfire, he led a friend down dark path toward a house nearby. In the total darkness, he fell into a black hole surrounded by a cement wall. In fact, he had fallen into a sewer, into what can only be called, well, you can use your imaginations.

He attempted to swim in the mud, but he began to sink deeper into the ooze. Meanwhile, a tremendous panic broke out above him. Local citizens flashed lights, grasped one another's arms, legs, offering limbs, articles of clothing to grab; a chaos of impossible rescue techniques followed. He recounted: “this brave fight for my life went on for at least thirty minutes.” He could barely keep his nose above the dreadful muck and thought this was the end, what a way to go. Finally, a long ladder was found.

My first take on this story is that sometimes hope can take hold through someone finding a longer ladder to help us out of the muck. Who of us has not felt, in some way at some time, that we were sinking more than we were moving forward?

Havel found that how hope had emerged from hopelessness, from the absurdity of falling into a sewer. Later, he would write in broader terms:

“Hope, either we have hope within us or we do not. Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons.

Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy that things are going well or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not because it stands a chance to succeed.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.

It is hope, above all which gives the strength to live and continually try new things.

Life is too precious a thing to ... live without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope.”

A piece of what I take away is that hope is not the same as joy. And sometimes those two emotions and expressions can bump up against each other, especially this time of year. Hope can fill us when there is little joy in the room and very little to laugh at.

What is it that we hope for?

The Apostle Paul wrote to the emerging Christian community in Rome – a church that was growing in the very heart of the Empire -- v. 4 “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” Paul distilled the purpose of all that had come before: hope. What’s more, he named God as the God of Hope... that you be filled all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

Hope does not come gift wrapped or shipped overnight to our front doors. It comes through shared, lived experience. It comes when we learn to align what we hope for with what God has promised. What has God promised? A creation that is blessed and good. A way of living with others that is reflected in a golden rule. An orientation of believing that what we possess is not ours alone. An awareness that we are never truly alone, for Christ is Emmanuel, which means simply ‘God with us.’

The people who came out to the river and found John baptizing wanted something more. For centuries those knew of Abraham and Moses and heard the words of Isaiah were hoping and waiting for a different kind of ruler -- a Messiah, an anointed one. In Isaiah, he hear how the v. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge.

We have heard this morning a challenge when it comes to hope, either we have hope within us or we do not.

Hope is the work of the Holy Spirit within us. It can direct us forward, through all that life brings.