

### Sustaining Hope

Hope is the traditional theme for the first Sunday of Advent, an important theme to embrace if you are feeling that hope is in short supply. We hear the theme of hope in our reading from Isaiah, even though Isaiah was speaking to a people who had every reason to abandon hope. Let me tell you why.

At the time of Isaiah, the Assyrians were the dominant power in the Ancient Near East, an area that was divided into many small nation states. These states were constantly at war, and the armies that emerged triumphant weren't exactly kind to the people they conquered. But even amid this general harshness, the Assyrians stood out as being particularly cruel. As one of my Old Testament professors put it, the Assyrians were "the pond scum of the Ancient Near East."

As the Assyrian armies advanced, the nations that stood in their way were given the choice of paying tribute or fighting for their lives. So when they entered Judah, and besieged its capital, Jerusalem, Ahaz, the king of Judah, decided to cut a deal. He agreed to let the Assyrians govern Judah if they would refrain from destroying Jerusalem. In addition, Judah would send substantial amounts of tribute back to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital.

According to Abraham Heschel, one of the foremost commentators on the Hebrew Bible prophets, this was a time when the power of the sword was absolute. The nation with the biggest army, the most weapons, and the brightest military leaders, was top dog. All the best efforts of rulers, and their advisors, went into figuring out new and better ways to make war. Men slaughtered each other and cities were battered into ruins, leaving behind death, destruction, and desolation. In a world drunk with power and bloated with militant arrogance, Isaiah dared to speak of a different vision—a vision of a world where swords are beaten into plowshares, and nations search, not for power, but for God's word.

At that time, there was no city more powerful or splendid than the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. The money that flowed into it, from all the conquered states, *not only helped to maintain a huge army*, Heschel notes, *but also lust, luster, and luxury*. By contrast, Jerusalem was a quiet, insignificant place, little known except as a target for invasion. *But*, Heschel writes, *in the vision of Isaiah the nations will no more turn their eyes to Nineveh, the seat of human power, but to Jerusalem, the seat of divine learning, eager to learn God's ways, eager to learn how to walk in [God's] paths*.

In the midst of a world torn apart by war, Isaiah proclaimed his belief that there would come a time when war would be abolished, and the passion for war would be subdued by the passion to discover God's ways: *Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore*. But here we are, more than 2700 years later, still living in a world that is torn apart by both internal and international conflicts. Do we still share Isaiah's hope? How *can* we still share

Isaiah's hope, in the light of 2700 more years of bloody history? Heschel states that two things saved the prophets from despair: their vision of the day when God would send the Messiah, who would usher in God's new creation— a realm of justice and peace— and their belief in humankind's capacity for repentance— our ability to recognize our errors and change our behavior.

In a world where human hatreds and violence seem so dangerously out of control, can these two things save us from despair? It was Isaiah's faith that God would send the Messiah. It is our faith that God *has* sent the Messiah, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Isaiah also believed in our ability to repent— to recognize where we have gone wrong, to ask for and receive God's forgiveness, and to make a fresh start, however many times we may need to do so. If our hope is going to be sustained, we need to share Isaiah's faith in the Messiah— that God has shown us God's vision for the world in the teachings and example of Christ— and his belief in our own capacity to know what is right, and to repent and change our behaviors when we have gone wrong.

Our reading from Matthew's gospel is also about hope, even though what is hoped-for sounds pretty terrible. Chapters twenty-four and twenty-five, of this gospel, are sometimes referred to as "the apocalyptic discourse." Apocalyptic, from a Greek word meaning to "reveal" or "disclose," was a genre of Jewish literature that flourished from about 200 B.C.E. to 150 C.E. The books of Daniel and Revelation were both written in this style. Apocalyptic uses heavily symbolic language to describe a current evil and to express the conviction that God will soon intervene, dramatically, to put things right. Its purpose is to strengthen the faithful, during times of suffering, with the assurance that God has not forgotten them and with the hope that God will come and redeem God's people.

Matthew's gospel was written sometime after the year 70 C.E., when the Romans savagely suppressed a Jewish uprising. They leveled much of Jerusalem, including the great temple, and exiled the Jews, who were forbidden, on pain of death, to return. For Matthew's community of post-exilic Christians, it must have seemed as if the world was coming to an end. But hadn't Jesus predicted just this?

Earlier in chapter 24, Jesus describes the signs that will herald the coming of the Son of Man: *. . . the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.* Alarming as it sounds, this is a hopeful prediction, because of what will happen next: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

After their time of trial, Christ would return in glory to gather up his faithful followers and lead them into his everlasting kingdom. In fact, they thought this was going to happen quite soon.

Verse 34 quotes Jesus as saying, *Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.* Sayings like this led Jesus' followers to believe that he would return within their lifetimes. There was a tremendous sense of urgency, a sense that there was no time to waste, a sense that he was coming back— soon!— and his followers needed to live as he had taught them to live— now!— if they hoped to be a part of his kingdom.

But Jesus didn't return, and the generation who had known him began to die out. This created a crisis in the Early Church. If the promise of Jesus' imminent return wasn't true, what about all the other things he'd said? Was *everything* he'd told them called into question? Church leaders did their best to solve this crisis by reinterpreting his apparent promise, remembering that Jesus had also said, as we heard in our reading, that the time of his return is known only to God.

We now know that Jesus didn't come again before the entire generation of those who knew him passed away. But even so, Christians have continued to believe that Christ will return *someday* to complete the work of restoring and renewing God's creation. But perhaps our expectations for when, and how, this is going to happen have changed. Certainly there are those who still expect a full-bore second coming, complete with wars and famines, signs and wonders, the salvation of the elect— who always seem to include those who hold this belief— and the suffering and damnation of everybody else. There are even elements in the Christian right who welcome, and encourage, the idea of an all-out holy war, in the Middle East, seeing this as a necessary precursor of Jesus' return.

But other Christians have come to expect a different kind of Second Coming, a more gradual realization of the realm of Christ. When I was Interim Minister at the Old Meeting House, their Associate Pastor, the Rev. David Connor, gifted me with the idea of the “kin-dom” of heaven. Members of the “kin-dom” of heaven recognize that every person, and indeed all of creation, is our kin, and merits the same love and care that we give to the rather narrow group we usually define as kin. The kin-dom is not some pie-in-the-sky future realization. It's right now! It's how we live and treat one another— today! In fact, Jesus said the kin-dom of heaven is *among* us— as a present reality and not as a future event.

Side-by-side with the frightening sayings about his second coming, we have the sayings in which Christ promises his *unending* presence with us. Jesus tried so hard to open the eyes of his followers to the signs of the kin-dom he was trying to show them, *right now*, in what theologian Daniel Migliore calls, *his surprising presence among the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned who cry out for help.* And he is still with us, working through us, whenever we recognize how deeply we are interwoven, and whenever we work to bring justice and peace, not to a future heaven, but to *this* earth. Theologian Hans Küng understands this as a way of being— a way of living *now*— that takes part *in the hidden, invisible, incomprehensible sphere of God which, far from being out of reach of earth, completes everything in good and provides a share in God's rule and kingdom.*

Like the defeated residents of Jerusalem, in Isaiah's time, and the exiled Christians of Matthew's time, as we look at the troubles in our country and our world, it may seem as if we have good reason to abandon hope. But Isaiah shows us another way, a way that holds fast to hope. Isaiah was able to speak his word of hope to his people because he continued to have faith in God's care for us and to look toward the best in humankind.

Today, as we begin another Advent season, we wait, with renewed longing, for Christ to bring peace and joy and love, not only into our own hearts, but into the heart of the world. And we take hope from Jesus' utterly surprising *first* coming— as a baby, tiny and vulnerable. (Could God have found any better way to open our hearts?) So rather than watching for falling stars and a darkened sun, I hope that we will stay alert so that we don't miss Jesus' *surprising presence among the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned who cry out for help*. And I hope that we will find all the signs and wonders we need when we see, and join, those who are working for the kin-dom, holding fast to a determination to live *now* in a way that takes part *in the hidden, invisible, incomprehensible sphere of God*.

Amen.