

Accept No Substitutes

Isaiah 2:1-9

The Thanksgiving turkey has barely settled in our stomachs, and suddenly it is Advent. Some years the calendar just doesn't give us enough time to catch our breath between one and the other, does it?

As I mentioned earlier we will be exploring the traditional themes of Advent this year, hope, peace, joy and love. And just as importantly, we'll look at what it means to live in hope and peace and joy and love in a time and in a world when it seems hopelessly naive to, if not absurd or impossible. They are themes for an in-between age. As Christians we believe that the Kingdom of God was born in the world in that Bethlehem stable 2,000 years ago. We celebrate Christ's coming, but we yearn for his return, because even though everything has changed, nothing has changed. The Kingdom may have dawned, but the world is still filled with violence and corruption and disease and poverty. People still live in fear. People still die of starvation. There are moments of joy; we get glimpses of peace; but the prophets and Jesus all call us to live as Advent people, immersed and grounded in hope, peace, joy and love, no matter what's going on around us, and you don't need me to tell you that's a tough thing to do.

As you have probably figured out from our liturgy, today's theme is hope. What does it mean to be hopeful in the face of all that darkness? How do we have hope when there's no hint in the air that God is waiting in the wings and ready to make his entrance, and our patience is wearing thin?

I spent part of this past week in New York with Science Hill's band. You don't have to be there long or have much imagination to realize that hope is not unique or particular to Christianity; it's not even particularly religious. Everyone is hopeful; everyone lives in the hope of something. The signs and symbols of it were everywhere. One kind of hope was characterized by the bright lights, the beauty of the displays in the store windows, the ubiquitous shiny black Lincolns driving important people here and there; the twinkling magic of the city, even the pure fun of places like M&M World (my personal favorite) and the LEGO store all offer a sort of hope; the hope that our shiny baubles and distractions and busy importance will bring us a measure of comfort and joy.

A very different kind of hope is portrayed in other parts of the city: at the Ground Zero site, cranes and steel workers and cement trucks are rebuilding from the devastation and promising that violence will not break us or be the final word. The common hope at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center is for healing and an end to disease and suffering. The U.N. building is a symbol of our universal hope for peace.

I may surprise you by the two things I'm going to say next, maybe even shock or offend you: First, even though the hope of riches, or trinkets, or a momentary escape from real life seems frivolous, and the hope for peace and health seems noble, ultimately they both come from the same place – a place of deep longing for a right and ordered world. We cannot praise the one and denounce the other, since they both recognize the same voids in our lives and in the world. The second surprising or shocking thing I'm going to say is that neither of those is the kind of hope that Isaiah was talking about, the sort of hope we are supposed to cling to during these long years of Advent waiting.

If you were to reduce all of those hopes and longings represented in Manhattan into one thing, it would be this: what we long for, what we hope for, is for God to come into the world and fix

things. Heal the people we love. Bring an end to poverty. Stop war. Satisfy our need for love and acceptance and belonging. Punish the people who brought all this evil on us.

But if you read Isaiah's words carefully, his vision, that isn't really what he sees, is it? What he sees is a world where everyone – EVERYONE! – streams to God's house and yearns more than anything else to walk in God's paths. What he sees isn't just a world where God swoops down and fixes everything that is broken, he sees a world where everything is transformed, where all God's people, and we are all God's people, want nothing more than to live the way God created us to live. What Isaiah envisions, what we are supposed to long for, hope for, isn't just a divine clean-up, but the reign of God. Where God's will is done on earth – by us – just as it is in heaven.

That kind of hope *is* specific to us, isn't it? As Christians we don't just hope for wealth or belonging or wholeness, or even world peace. Our hope is for nothing short of the complete and utter transformation of the world, including us.

So where is the practical, take-home message in this? So far all we've said is in the realm of the theoretical; maybe some fodder for lunch time discussion, but not much more. It won't change your life, and frankly, humbly, God's Word to you preached on Sunday morning **should** change your life.

I think the take-home message is this: If everything that we've said so far is true, then hope – Christian, hope, Advent hope – is far more than pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking about what God does to terrorists and child abusers some day, or abolishes all forms of disease. Hope isn't a thought, an idea, a belief. Hope is an activity. Hope is work. Remember, those swords weren't magically or mystically beaten into plowshares. People did it. Hope doesn't just wait or long for some future event, it starts to work for it.

When John the Baptist comes on the scene he will call this repentance, conversion. Hope is the visible sign of our conversion. Not from immorality to morality, or from secular to religious, but from self to other. From me to us. From individual to community.

In Sena Jeter Naslund's new book, *Adam and Eve*, the main character crashes her plane in an Eden-like garden in the Middle East where she is found and nursed back to health by its only other inhabitant, Adam. And then one day two fighter jets collide overhead and they rescue one of the injured pilots who parachutes into the forest canopy over their garden. Lucy remarks, "The primal work has come to us...the work of taking care of each other." When Adam objects and points out that he had already been taking care of her, she agrees, but says, now "the primal work has come to *us*, together...for us to take care of somebody besides ourselves."

That is the work of Eden, isn't it, the work of God's kingdom. And it is the work of hope. Working together to take care of someone besides ourselves. Doing ourselves the very thing we had 'hoped' God would swoop down and take care of while we stood idly by doing our own thing, pursuing our own interests and desires. To paraphrase John Buchanan from Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian, the hopeful task of Advent is to work at transforming the implements of conflict into tools of community.

Will we transform the world all by ourselves with our hopeful activity? No, that really is the work of God for the day of Christ's coming. But if we are busy being hopeful, living as though the reign of God were already here, in us, in the Church, the wait won't seem so long, or the darkness so dark.