***WHERE IS YOUR HOPE?***

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Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 12:15-21

 Happy New Year! You may still be lingering over the Thanksgiving leftovers or fretting over the diminishing number of shopping days until Christmas or lamenting your football team’s pathetic performance over the weekend, but while you are snacking or fretting or lamenting, the church is celebrating a new year with this first Sunday in Advent. I doubt that many of you were out last night welcoming in this new year in the same way that you will celebrate the arrival of 2017 in a few weeks – but I could be wrong. The dawn of this new church year is easily lost in the afterglow of our national Thanksgiving, but there is a common thread that ties together Thursday’s thanks and Advent’s anticipation.

 Thanksgiving is a day to give thanks for our abundant blessings past and present, blessings like the food you shared with family and friends this week and living blessings like those folks sitting beside you in the pew. On most days we take those blessings for granted, but one day a year we pause as a nation to acknowledge how blessed we are, regardless of how blessed we are. Some of you recall the old gospel hymn *In the Sweet By and By*, though most of you were not there when it was released in 1868. It was sung by American settlers in the 19th century who often lived on the edge between living and dying while trying to carve a life out of an often inhospitable land. The hymn offers a hope-filled vision for a heavenly future amid the present reality of difficult days. You may remember the refrain:

*In the sweet by and by*

*We shall meet on that beautiful shore,*

*In the sweet by and by*

*We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

The last stanza of that hymn finds voice for thanksgiving praise:

*To our bountiful Father above*

*We will offer our tribute and praise;*

*For the glorious gift of His love*

*And the blessings that hallow our days*.

Praise, love and blessings abound in the present even as those singing settlers looked forward to the promise of that glorious future in the sweet by and by. Writing of the last stanza of that hymn, Craig Barnes says:

*It is the last line of this gospel hymn…that demonstrates a secret the settlers knew that subsequent generations have forgotten. The hope of heaven wasn’t simply an escapist dream they nurtured. It was a means of finding sacredness in the days they had. That is the function of hope. It isn’t about our fantasies for tomorrow, but about living in the day we have with a vision of how life ought to be and will be one day.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

That is to say that our hope for future days and the blessings of our present days are entwined. Hope for the future sustains us in the present. In our daily blessings we find God with us, and the assurance that God is with us gives us hope and strength with which to face the challenges of this day and the days to come. Present blessings and future hope go hand in hand.

 This long weekend which began with Thanksgiving and ends this first Sunday of Advent embraces the promise of blessing and hope with gratitude for both. We are blessed people who are blessed yet again with Advent hope! In a world in which so many people feel un-blessed this day and search for even a glimmer of hope for tomorrow, we have good news to share. Like the settlers who could sing amid the difficulties of day-to-day existence, we have songs of praise and hope that make sacred these days in which we live. They are songs that Syrian refugees fleeing a nation in chaos long to hear. They are songs that people in Haiti recovering from yet another disaster long to hear. They are songs that Palestinians and Israelis alike long to hear. They are songs that patients in our cancer center long to hear. They are songs of hope in the midst of discouragement, distress, disease or despair.

 Isaiah sang such songs to the people of Judah and Jerusalem. With enemies on all sides and an Assyrian invasion on the horizon Isaiah offered a hopeful promise of peace. It was a promise not only for Judah, but for all nations, a word of peace for nations more accustomed to conflict. That prophetic word, along with the prophecies of Isaiah 9 and 11, are some of the few bright spots in these early chapters of Isaiah. Most of the early prophecies portend gloom and doom for a disobedient people, but these words of Isaiah offer a glimmer of hope:

*In days to come the mountain of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and…all nations shall stream to it*.

The “mountain of the Lord” was Mt. Zion, a hill in Jerusalem upon which Solomon had built the temple. It was for Jews a holy place in the midst of a holy city. When David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem the city became holy and Mt Zion became the “mountain of the Lord”. It was here in the holy city, the home of God, that nations and people from north, south, east and west would come to acknowledge the Lord as God and seek to walk in God’s ways.

 The concept of nation was not that of a political entity with borders, but a cultural and religious identity with traditions. The prophecy was thus the promise of unity among all people under God. No longer would war be the means to resolve disputes, for “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” They will beat their “swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” Rather than just laying aside their weapons for the moment, they would convert them to more productive purposes. The Scots say that beating swords into golf clubs is what makes golf a holy game, but whether it is plowshares or nine-irons, the promise is that implements of war will become instruments of peace. That is not to say that there will be no disagreements, but such disputes will be resolved, not by war, but by a divine arbitrator who is God.

 Imagine the implications for Syria, Palestine, Iraq or America! Long simmering disputes would be resolved, not by negotiation or shuttle diplomacy or overwhelming force, but by God. Peacekeepers would not be soldiers armed with high-tech weapons, but faithful servants of God armed with love and the law of the Lord. Our own involvement would have less to do with American interests than with Christian love and justice. It would be a far different world from that in which we now live!

 The reality is that those days are still to come and are not yet here. God has come to us in Jesus Christ, the “Prince of Peace”, but we continue to brandish the swords and spears of war. We still live in a time in which the hope-filled prophecy of peace and the violent realty of our lives conflict. A familiar poem written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at Christmas 1864 in the midst of the American Civil War captures the tension between prophecy and reality:

*I heard the bells on Christmas day*

*Their old familiar carols play*

*And wild and sweet the words repeat*

*Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!*

*I thought how, as the day had come,*

*The belfries of all Christendom*

*Had rolled along the unspoken song*

*Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my head:*

*“There is no peace on earth” I said,*

*“For hate is strong, and mocks the song*

*Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.”*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep*

*“God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!*

*The wrong shall fail; the right prevail,*

*With peace on earth, good will to men!”*

The reality of conflict does not negate the hope and promise of peace in days to come, for our hope is in the living God! This journey through Advent to the manger reminds us that hope endures in the child whose birth prompted angels to sing and wise men to journey a long way to offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. In the words of Paul Engle:

 *Seeing the star the Wise Men, swift*

 *To bow to the Boy gave Him their gift.*

 *Their gift was gold, and the bent knee,*

 *Hard metal and humility.*

 *Now He, the son of Joseph’s wife*

 *Gives them His gift: Immortal life.*

 *This is the hope of a world gone wild:*

 *When proud men kneel to a little Child.*

The words of poets often say what is hard to say and give expression to our hope amid the reality of our conflicted lives. Jesus came at a time when God’s people were under the heavy hand of Roman rule, at a time when hopes were dim and the only peace was the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. He came into the world, and so frightened of his coming was King Herod that he slaughtered innocent children in hopes of killing the baby Jesus. Into that age of conflict between the prophecy of peace and the reality of Herod and Rome, Jesus entered the world, not as a triumphant king, but as a humble baby born to peasant parents in the stable of a country inn. He came in peace for a world wracked with strife, he came with hope for a world that despaired that there was any hope to be found, he came in love so that we might know that we are loved and not forgotten, he came so that we might live with love and hope all our days.

 Where then is your hope these days? It is in the same place and person as those living under Roman rule, in the babe born in Bethlehem. Rob Bell says that “what you believe about the future shapes, informs, and determines how you live now.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Dare to hold onto hope in these anxious times, dare to hope because you believe in a future shaped by God,

 a future in which Christ reigns,

 a future in which God is persistently present,

 a future in which God holds the whole world in strong, loving, just, divine hands.

Our hope for today is grounded in what we believe about that first Christmas long ago, but also in what we believe about the risen Christ’s continuing presence with us and his glorious return in days to come. That is what this Advent is all about – about remembering Jesus past, about affirming Jesus present and about anticipating Jesus future – coming to us with hope in hand – hope for the world, hope for you and for me. Amen

1. M. Craig Barnes, *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls*, 2003, p.41 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, HarperOne: New York, 2011, p.46 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)