

December 3, 2017

TEXT: Isaiah 64:1–9

TITLE: Advent Waiting: Hope Against Hope

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

A poem was found scratched into a cellar wall in Cologne Germany. It was discovered shortly after the end of World War Two in an area of town in which Jews once hid to escape the Nazis. Although no author is named, it is believed that these words of hope were written by a Jewish man or woman—some have even suggested a child—hiding in an attempt to save their life during the Holocaust. The poem starts like this:

I believe in the sun, even when it isn't shining
I believe in love, even when there's no one there
I believe in God, even when he is silent.¹

These words get to me. Even without the context, the prayer itself is powerful. It reminds us of the fundamental ability of our hearts to stretch to believe in that which we cannot see. Our pediatrician told us that when our son was around four month's old he would develop object permanence—the ability to know that something still exists even when he cannot see it. Mom is still there when she goes to take a shower. The ball still exists when it rolls under the couch. This prayer lays claim to the object permanence of that which we experience at our core, but cannot even touch.

But when I hear this profession of faith in light of its context, I am challenged. I can't help but wonder if I've got it in me, like this author did, *to hope against hope*: to hang one's hat on the claim that goodness trumps evil even when the world is showing us the worst of humanity around us. It's easy to do when life goes our way—when we get the promotion or the baby is giggling, or the weather is perfect for a long walk outside or our favorite song comes on the radio. When life hands us a blessing or throws us a bone we can trust that sunshine will follow rain, that love wins, and that God is in control.

But how does someone do it when every circumstance of life bears witness to the contrary? How does a person find the nerve to believe these things when nothing is secure? How does someone find hope when life is hard—when they lost their life's savings with the market crash; when the mammogram finds something; when a spouse leaves? And how on earth do they do it when life is extreme in its peril: when they fear rightly for their own life and the lives of those they love?

Our Old Testament lesson for this first Sunday of Advent asks these questions too. It takes us back in time to somewhere in the middle of the 6th c BCE. The Israelites who

had once been freed from captivity by God's hand now find themselves in exile following Babylonian conquest. They are strangers in a strange land, away from home, community and the temple in which they had praised God has been destroyed. "Where is God?" they cry out—and with good reason. They need God—God's deliverance, God's direction, God's peace...God's help.

The God they worship is hidden, out of sight. Once they had, with their ancestors, sung songs of praise to a God who was known for God's power—a God who could do the impossible. This God was persistent and present, in spite of the shortfalls of God's people. Where was God now?

So God's people cry out in lament, asking these very questions of God. They petition God to show up, and to show up in a big way. They petition God to make mountains quake and the earth tremble. They confess their sins, knowing that they haven't always been in step with God's will, and they pray for God's forgiveness. They profess their faith in God's power, even if they can't see it for themselves, and submit themselves to God's shaping—that God might mold them into the people God would have them to be.

But even as we read the words of their lament this morning, we see strands of hope. They cry out not only because they are in distress but also because *they trust that God is out there and God hears them*. They speak out from their distress placing their hope in the belief that *even hidden, God is present and close*. They confess their sins not just because they know that they need to apologize, but because they trust that *God is merciful*. They cry out that life is hard, but they still believe in God's power to shape things—and finding comfort that if God can't shape their circumstances, surely God can shape their hearts.

One commentator writes:

God's refusal to replicate a Red Sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel (or the church). Our hope does not rely on God's acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God's being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65:17). The tradition of biblical lament does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future.¹

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary – Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

Ancient Israelites in exile found hope in shared memories of God. They found hope because they paid close attention to who God is and to what God has done—not just for them, but for all. They held tightly to the identity they had in God—God’s handiwork, God’s children. God is the potter. They are the clay. And here they find hope, which lightens the burden of their very real despair. They were not alone. They belong to God.

The readings this first Sunday of Advent remind us that, like so many others throughout history, we live in a time of tension. Yes, we live in an historical moment in which there is plenty of tension—politically, racially, and culturally. But from a theological position we live in tension too. We live in the “already but not yet” moment in which we have received the salvation won for us in Christ, but in which we acknowledge that there is so much from which we need to be saved. We profess that Christ conquered sin and death—but we are all too well aware that there is still sin and there is still death. As a people of faith we acknowledge that God *is* active and present, and yet God at times is so hidden from our view.

So what do we do in the midst of the tensions we face?

Well, first, Advent invites us to wait. To sit tight. To be patient. To trust that the God who has acted on humanity’s behalf over and over again will continue to do so. The liturgical calendar invites us into a space of waiting. We mark our waiting with Advent calendars and wreaths and devotionals—not in an effort to countdown to Christmas, but as a practice of active waiting—so that we might wait with scripture, with prayer, with community...so that in our waiting we might cultivate hope.

Together we await the celebration of Christ’s birth. And together we wait for the second coming of our Savior, Jesus the Christ, and for the time when he will come to make all things new. This waiting is not passive, but pregnant with possibility—and continual reminders that God is a God worth hoping for.

So where do we find our hope, today? News headlines do not hesitate to remind us that the world is not always a friendly place—particularly for those most vulnerable. We could easily make a list of vulnerable persons and tidily file the headline under the person or group harmed by or within the story. Tax plan—the poor, the retired, Alaskan wildlife; Alabama’s Republican candidate for Senate, Roy Moore—women and girls; North Korean missile launches—well, all of us.

And yet light does break through when we draw on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future—when we read of God's faithfulness in scripture and when we share testimony from our lives of God's love at work upon us or through us.

Light breaks through when the baby we baptize in worship today plays baby Jesus next week on our church's pageant. Before he has words to speak Bennett is already a part of God's story. In his baptism we hear the story that he is one claimed by God and called beloved. Bennett is one forgiven from sin before he has even done anything wrong. Bennett is assured of eternal life just three and a half after being born. And before he can speak a word of God's love he will embody for us—cradled in the arms of his mother (who will be dressed as an angel) and a 4th grade girl playing Mary—he will remind us that once upon a time God came light came into the darkness and that light could not be put out. He will remind us once upon a time God came to us to us as a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem—that God put on flesh and dwelt among us—so that we would know that God loves us all.

Light breaks in when a baby is born. Light breaks in through moments of grace and reconciliation and forgiveness. Light breaks in through kind acts, through gracious smiles, through words of encouragement. Light breaks in upon us and through us, for we are called to be salt and light for this hurting world.

That poem on the cellar wall concludes with a prayer:

“May there someday be sunshine
May there someday be happiness
May there someday be love
May there someday be peace...”

Brothers and sisters, may that someday be now. May that someday be tomorrow. May that someday be a day for which we pray and for which we work—that God's love and light and happiness and peace might prevail over all the earth.

Brothers and sisters, may it be so. Amen.

ⁱ <https://sairyd.wordpress.com/2011/11/13/a-poem-of-belief-by-a-jewish-prisoner-in-a-nazi-concentration-camp/>