

“Life and Light”: Hopes and Fears

Advent 1

12.3.17

Text: Isaiah 9:1-7; John 1:1-5



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Was the celebration of Advent a part of you or your family’s faith formation? If so, how did you celebrate it? How did you find that it contributed to the meaning of the season?”

“Can you think of a time, recently, when you were required to ‘wait’? What were you waiting for? Did the waiting automatically produce patience? What responses did it provoke in you and from you?”

“How would you describe the difference between hope (as the Bible offers it) and optimism? Do you have to be a ‘glass-half-full’ person to be hopeful?”

“Do you see any connection between hope and the ability to delay gratification? Why is it so hard for us to hear, ‘Not yet’, or ‘later’?”

“Do you think that, sometimes, it’s good to feel empty? Why do you think we so quickly attempt to cram things into the empty space?”

“Where might your vision of hope be blocked by the circumstance? Is hopelessness really about the circumstance itself, or is it our evaluation and response to the circumstance? Is it actually possible to be hopeful in less than favorable circumstances? At whom, or what, is your hope directed? Can it carry the weight?”

Perhaps you might take some time to prayerfully share around some of your reflections from the Advent Response Card you received during our worship gathering this week.

Teaching Notes...

So, we enter today the season identified in the Christian calendar as, **Advent**. It’s not a celebration we are commanded to observe, but one in which followers of Jesus have been participating for centuries in order to make themselves available to and present for God in the season.

As we consider the text from John, no one hearing the phrase, *“In the beginning...”*, would have heard it without immediately returning to the story’s genesis (beginning).

In Genesis 1, the climax of the creation story appears to be humans, made to reflect the image of God and steward his will amongst creation. To *‘grow the garden’*, so to speak.

Then, in John 1, the climax is the arrival of the truly human one; the “Word” (thoughts, intents, ideas, dreams, visions, plans) of God, fleshed out.

The theme, then, is: don’t start with ‘God’ and work your way back toward Jesus. Start with Jesus and find God.

The contrast of *“light and darkness”* are ways that many ancient faiths used to describe the spiritual conflict between good and evil. The dilemma that dominates the whole story? God comes to us, illuminating the truth, and life, and love, and we refuse to receive it. It is the worst form of darkness: darkness that persists in the opportunity of light.

The theme of Advent is ‘arrival’ (Latin, ‘coming’; ‘arrival’)

The mood of Advent is best described as ‘expectation’.

Each year, we are challenged to enter the story and re-live the longings of people whose history has included extended bouts with oppression and domination and exile. A people in anticipation of a better future with a world ruled by an ideal King (one ‘after God’s own heart’, like their beloved, King David)--- a divine, yet mysterious ‘rescuer’. They called him *“Messiah”* (Greek, *‘Christ’*, used over 500x in the NT).

Prophets were always standing in the present and asking us to see what was yet to appear. They used phrases like, *“on that day”*, *“the day will come”*, *“in those days”*, as a means of continuing to rehearse the hope that God had not forgotten about them; that he would, one day, act to address the injustice and set things right.

For some, (400) years (inter-testament period, interestingly, identified as the ‘dark period’), the Israelites experienced *“silence”*.

“We no longer see your miraculous signs. All the prophets are gone, and no one call tells us when it will end.” Psalm 74:9

It seems that way for all of us, in seasons, doesn’t it? The screen goes black. The dysfunctionality of our lives just seems to be “looping”. No detectable God-movement. ‘Crickets’.

Advent is the season for paradoxes: between Jesus’ vision of a world being directed and organized around the loving rule of God, and the dysfunctionality that surrounds us. Between our sense that the world is abandoned and the declaration that *“God is with us”*.

Advent is a season that can only be celebrated by those who are aware of their longings.

Who either know what they desire, and have simply not secured it, or aren’t even sure of their desires, but know that what they are currently experiencing is not satisfying them.

“hope”: *anticipation, expectation of good.* We use phrases like, *“Holding onto hope”*, *“Hope against hope”*, *“Hope deferred makes the heart-sick”*.

Hope waits well.

Waiting can create any number of responses, the least of which being, “patience”. It can heighten our expectation levels. It can dramatically elevate our anxieties, or it can create a sense of debilitating despair: living with the presence of desire/longing, with nothing to which you might attach your hope.

This is the one, I think, we find most prevalent, because despair demands much less of us than hope.

We can remain passive and continue to rehearse all the ways that we’ve been victimized. It’s not as embarrassing as being hopeful! There aren’t as many questions to answer.

Hope is actually a response to longing.

What we are hoping “**for**” says something about what we don’t already have. It also suggests a certain level of confidence in that something or someone we are hoping “**in**”.

A clue: the thing in which you hope is likely the thing you fear losing most.

Paul says, “*Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently*”. Romans 8:24-25

Hope is ultimately connected to an outcome, but not a circumstance. Hope is cumulative.

circumstance: ‘to stand around’ (Latin). If hope is circumstantial, then you will be left to gauge the possibilities by what you see ‘surrounding you’.

We continue to live under the illusion of control; we are convinced that the outcome we desire is manageable and within reach... apart from God.

Romans 5

Adversity--Endurance--Character (experience)--Hope.

The adverse circumstance (fill in the ‘*crisis-du-jour*’), actually becomes opportunity for us to experience God and to find reason to choose to trust, believing that he is present and at work in all of my life, taking even the things that appear pain-filled and ruinous and announcing, “*Yeah, I can work with that*”, as a means of displaying his goodness... because he loves me.

Ease/comfort--Avoidance--Anesthetize--Optimism.

There is no trail of logic or human rationale that begins with ‘adversity’ and results in ‘hope’, even though it is those kind of stories that connect deeply with our souls. We want the narrative to resolve itself in heroic and favorable ways.

So, we realize the frustration of spending a lifetime, in a broken world, expecting ease and advantage, avoiding discomfort, numbing our pain, and naively anticipating anything other than despair.

Hope is a theological word. A “God-word”.

Hope is not to be confused with optimism. When people say that they are ‘optimistic’, they typically base that on the acquisition of resources available to them, then working them together toward a favorable outcome (e.g. the only people who are optimistic about the market are those who presently have money in it.)

When we use the word ‘hope’, it always has a confessional tone to it. We are admitting that what we desire is something that we do not currently possess. It’s always a word of dependence spoken from a posture of humility. It says things like, “*I don’t have...*”, and, “*I need...*”, and, “*I can’t...*”

Hope is always fixed in the confidence that God will make good on his promises, which challenges the ways in which we are presently functioning, and which outlasts our fatigue and frustration.

Hope always demands a courageous choice for love. Everything else is disappointing.

Our circumstance disappoints us. Waiting, at times, incites disappointment. People disappoint us.

Paul says that “*hope doesn’t disappoint us because we know how dearly God loves us...*” The word Paul uses here for ‘disappointment’, means to blush with shame because that in which we have hoped has proven deceptive.

Hope means that even in the waiting, in some profound way, we already possess it; it possesses us.

Even though it has not become our reality, it already has a power over us; it currently determines “how” and “how long” we are willing to wait. It allows us to be hopeful, but not naïve.

“I am counting on the Lord; yes, I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word. O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is unfailing love. His redemption overflows.” Psalm 130:5-7