

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT Living in Hope

Isaiah 61:1-4

Behold Your God!

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Sunday, December 11, 2011

First Service - Chapel at 8:15 a.m.; Sanctuary - 9:15 and 11 a.m

Living in Hope: Strong in Broken Places December 11, 2011

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1). These are the words with which the prophet Isaiah approaches the people of Israel who have suffered in exile, whose lives have been broken by the oppression of Babylon. He comes to offer them hope.

Moving from the Old Testament to the New (Luke 4:16ff), Jesus reads these very same words in the synagogue on the Sabbath, following his temptation in the wilderness. *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me...to bring good news to the poor.* After he reads the words of Isaiah, Luke records, *[Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down...and the people were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.* Indeed, these are gracious words. As a member of our staff recently said in one of our times of devotion, "Just in the hearing of [certain passages from Scripture], you feel drawn closer to God."

Jesus quoted these words following his temptation in the wilderness, which reminds me of Israel's time of exile in Babylon—a time of vulnerability and distance from the comforts of home. I recently saw a painting by the Russian artist, Ivan Kramskoi, of Jesus during this time in the wilderness, when he must resist the devil's taunts and provocations. In the painting, Jesus' face looks weary, drawn out, pained, and the stark background of the wilderness reflects and reinforces the reality of his pain. It's clear that the artist captured an important point about this moment in Jesus' story. He is not "rising above" his suffering. He is not numb to his physical hunger and pain. All of it is fully experienced, because he is fully human.

He is living through this trial by the very word of God, which he quotes repeatedly. In the saying of God's word, just as in the hearing of it, the Holy Spirit draws near to protect and see him through. The words spoken by Isaiah bring God's word of hope to the people of Israel in exile, and from that root Jesus builds on the hope which comes from God in the very way he enters, lives, leaves, and returns to this, our world in exile.

One of the Advent Scripture readings about hope is from Psalm 147:10, 11: *His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of man; the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.* That is poetic language. The "strength of a horse" is the strength of one's possessions, one's riches, one's "horsepower." The "legs of man" is a poetic phrase for the power of self-reliance. In contrast, says the psalmist, "the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love."

It may sound a bit odd to talk about hope in the face of suffering, two Sundays before Christmas, but indeed, why was Jesus born? Was it not so we could know and experience firsthand, and therefore live, his way of hope each day? *For God did not send his Son into the world, to condemn the world, but to save the world...not through us, but, "through him."*

The world tells us to place our hope in the strength of our worldly possessions and the power they give us, in our own "horsepower." It tells us to rely on our cunning and smarts to win over others. But Jesus and the prophets, while not denying the power of riches and self-discipline, point us to a power that will never fade, and will accompany us into the kingdom of heaven: the power of God's steadfast love.

So if your mind is set on daily battles, wins and losses, victories and defeats, then your mind is not fixed in the hope of the Gospel. It has been captivated by temptations that do not come from God. These are temptations to hope in the kind of power the devil offered Jesus in the wilderness to rule over others. The kind of power Israel was tempted to turn to when oppressed by Babylon.

A life lived in the kind of hope expressed in the words we find in Isaiah is a life which is laser focused on *binding up the brokenhearted.* Such a focus lifts up both you and those around you. It raises the question, in the end, how will others say you've lived your life? That you conquered all, won every battle, secured the approval of the crowd? That you were a success? Indeed, much of history is written from such a perspective. Or will they say that the Lord spoke through your words and your ways of being in the world? While such a life may or may not be written in the annals of human history, such a life is recorded in heaven, in a book composed by God's own hand.

Václav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic once said, "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good." I'd add to or alter that quote a bit, while staying within its spirit, and say that, "Hope is a posture or disposition toward life, which is not of or even always for the self."¹

I think that begins to get at the kind of hope that we are given in Scripture, hope that is echoed in the prophet's words, *to comfort all who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory.* (Isaiah 61:3)

I like the image Isaiah gives us, as people of faith, that we are intended to grow and stand tall – as tall as glorious oaks of righteousness, witnesses to God's good ways. As I reflect on my upbringing in the church, and my pastorate now, the faces of many

saints come to my mind when I ponder that phrase, “oak of righteousness.” The people I am thinking of always have a word of encouragement, prayer, and grace, no matter their circumstance. They are a light and a joy to those around them. They don’t let the politics of the world, or even of the church, dominate their imaginations, although many try to get them to take their “side” on one issue or another.

No, rather it seems they walk in the doors of the church on Sunday morning, or work on Monday, with a mission to build another up in some tangible way, with a word of praise or assistance in time of need. These are the people who, when I visit them in time of trouble or distress, end up lifting me more than I do them.

When I was young I had the impression that the reason these people were so upbeat was because they had been spared the hardships of life. As I’ve grown as a Christian and as a pastor, I’ve come to realize that those who have the capacity to shine the light of hope in other people’s lives are often those who have experienced great darkness and hardship, or have experienced great losses in life which cause them to recognize how fragile and precious each person is. Rather than turning that brokenness inward to manifest itself in cynicism, bitterness, or control over others, they have turned that hurt over to God, so he may do something better with it. Rather than growing increasingly independent, they grow increasingly dependent on God’s grace, and on his grace for others.

...the Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.

Not too long ago, while reading an art book, I came across a quote taken from *A Farewell to Arms*, by Ernest Hemingway. I thought it was brilliant, and so I decided to pull out my old paperback copy of the novel, and wouldn’t you know? The words of that quote were the only ones I had underlined when I read the book over twenty-five years ago. They made an impression on me then, as they do now: “The world breaks every one...and afterward many are strong in broken places.”²

Of course, those words are representative of Hemingway’s spare and, at times, stark prose. Just the first few words are a challenge to take in. “The world breaks every one...” I don’t really want to believe that is true but, no doubt in a time of war such as the one in which the story takes place, those words would resonate with the experience of thousands. Through...in ways spoken and unspoken, in ways known publically, and in ways known privately by any soul who looks at the ceiling in the middle of the night, filled with anxiety, praying for the beginning of the day, because no more sleep can be had...everyone DOES experience, at least at some point, a time when they are completely broken. Literally or figuratively, their legs fall out from under them.

That is a crucial point because, as Hemingway adds in his line, “...and afterward many are strong in broken places.” Not all, but many. I believe a core principle of Scripture is that in such a time of brokenness, we discover what real hope is. It is not a certainty that things will somehow get better, but a conviction and a commitment to labor by God’s strength, from this point on, to make things better not just for me, but for all.

I recently had an email exchange with a former professor of mine by the name of Dow, who teaches at Chicago Theological Seminary. When I was in his class years ago, he told a personal story about having a connection through a friend with an organization in North Chicago that worked to bring young women, and sometimes girls, out of a life of prostitution. You can only imagine how oppressive one’s life circumstances would have to be to find yourself in this kind of trouble at such a young age. It is tragic how many young people in our society are left so vulnerable to the darkest forces of our world. Professor Dow, quite innocently and with positive intent, went to the director of the organization, which was run out of a large home.

The director’s name was Sharon. Dow offered to help in her work to bring hope into the lives of these young women however he could: raising money, serving on the board, giving talks, leading prayers, teaching from Scripture, whatever it was. He had heard about the organization’s work. He knew it was of God, and wanted to be a part. He just didn’t know how. So he showed up one day in his coat and tie and presented his *curriculum vitae* to the director, in true academic form. He said, “These are my qualifications. Do you see any ways in which I can be of help?”

The director, a wise woman who had seen some of the worst effects of man’s inhumanity to others come through her door, smiled sweetly as she looked over his paperwork, his list of publications, his academic honors...and finally put the papers down and asked, “Can you cook?” A little surprised at her question, he responded, “Ummm....yes, in fact I’m a good cook. Quite practiced!”

“Doesn’t your wife cook?”

“I learned in self-defense,” he replied.

“Good,” she said.

She told him when to come back to prepare a meal for a gathering of the women and a team of volunteers who worked with them. They agreed the meal would be Mexican. In his telling, he describes how he really poured himself into the task, and how some of the women were taken aback by the intensity of his efforts—a real Babette’s Feast! In his telling, he goes into great detail about the about the smells, tastes, and colors of the food, and the enjoyment of conversations around the table.

After everyone had left and he was reflecting on the experience, the director asked him, “Do you know why I asked you to cook?”

“Not exactly,” the professor replied.

“You got to understand. Do you know what kind of relationship these women have had with men? Do you know what it means to meet a man who doesn’t want something from you? Who [instead] does something for you? And doesn’t ask anything back? Do you know what it means to meet a man who will do something to nurture you? And in a way that is simple and real and easy to understand? You got to understand, honey, you’re not just here to cook; you’re here to feed somebody.”³

Often when we think about living in hope, we think about somehow escaping our own troubles, or about a future date when the troubles of the world will no longer plague our personal lives. But the hope that God would have for us is less a wish for ourselves than it is for a way of life, a hope that takes sober assessment of the fact that troubles in life have a way of surfacing time and time again. Rarely does anyone reach that golden point of life when all goes perpetually well. Even more, the troubles any one of us may bear, often (not always) pale when compared to the troubles of the “least of these” on this earth.

So what causes God joy is when we turn our hope from God not only inward but finally outward toward others. Because there is something mysterious, amazing, powerful, and biblical about having hope for someone else, and expressing that hope, as Sharon the director said to my professor, “in a way that is simple and real and easy to understand.” It is getting in touch with the kind of hope Jesus has for us, so we might have it for others. Such hope lives, truly comes alive in you, is born in you, as if born in a manger, when you turn your hope toward someone else, as God has turned his hope toward you in Jesus Christ.

As we approach this Christmas, we can take on this mission of having hope for someone else. Just consider whom that person may be, and think about how you can demonstrate your hope for their life. So it might be said of each of us in this congregation that we have given a garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a mantle of praise instead of a faint [or weak] spirit. Because, my friends, you’re not just here to cook. You’re here to feed somebody. So you and they might know what hope is. So you both might know what it means to be strong in broken places.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 181.
2. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 249.
3. This story paraphrased from Dow Edgerton’s account. Susan Thistlethwaite and George Cairns, eds., *Beyond Theological Tourism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 26-31.