



“Where We Find Hope”
Scripture – Isaiah 11:1-9
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 10, 2017

When we peruse the headlines, there is little evidence to predict that a better day hovers just beyond the horizon. The litany of woes pounds like a never-ending drumbeat: poverty, discrimination, drug addiction, crime, sexual abuse, terrorism, environmental disaster, war... And not only are we faced with these persistent evils that haunt humanity, our culture is currently sojourning in a moral desert. With such brazen lying, shameless arrogance, unabashed greed, merciless indifference, unrestrained anger, spiteful revenge, and unblushing selfishness, it sometimes feels as if we are stumbling through an ethical wasteland and not far from a world where *anything goes*.

The church is vital to civilization because it is where we can discover the source of genuine hope. Christians do not believe in a hostile and meaningless universe. We believe there is a Creator who not only generates life, but *cares* about life. Followers of Jesus cling to hope in the face of the current quagmire because we believe there is nothing in all creation to separate us from God’s love and God has a purpose for our lives.

If there is no God, there is no hope for a world where compassion, justice, and peace will prevail. Evil will triumph. Game. Set. Match.

However, if we believe in a God who cares, and who works tirelessly to spread light in the darkness, then there is not only a reason to live, but an incentive to connect with God in ushering in a better world. Crazy as it sounds, and swimming against the tide of evidence, people of faith believe a better day is not only possible, but will one day become a reality.

The Christian faith does not offer an escape from the atrocities of the world. Instead, faith is where we garner strength and the church is where we discover support to face whatever suffering we encounter. Our faith ignores neither the pain nor the injustices that are so prevalent, but rather arouses genuine hope that God is guiding the world to a better future.

One way that the candle of hope can be snuffed out is if we adopt a fatalistic mindset. Believing that it will always be this way and nothing can alter the course of history is a prescription for despair. Fatalism suffocates hope.

However, Jesus and the prophets remind us that God has better intentions for the world. Our text from Isaiah is one of the compelling visions we find in Scripture that inspires hope.

Borrowing an example from nature, Isaiah begins with a metaphor. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Where once a mighty tree stood, there is only a stump. The tree may have decayed, may have been blown over in a fierce storm, or may have been cut down. Whatever the case, where there was once a tree, now there is only a stump. But wait. Out of this stump, there is a shoot. New life is growing out of what was seemingly dead.

He names the stump Jesse, because Jesse was the father of David who was hailed as the greatest king of the Hebrew people. By Isaiah’s time, 250 years later, the people had seen an endless string of unscrupulous and incompetent rulers who had severely weakened the nation. But, now, Isaiah envisions a ruler who will be even greater than the legendary David. Isaiah declares, “The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” Christians understand these words as pointing to Jesus.

Then, Isaiah unleashes the dream of God; a vision that can only be captured in poetry, and madcap poetry at that. Isaiah uses wild and exorbitant images to picture a world where not only humans but all creatures abide in peace. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

Who we are today is not simply a product of our DNA and our past experiences. We are also shaped by our vision of the future – who we can become and the kind of world we can help create. If our vision of the future is more of the same, then we will contribute to making it so. However, if our vision of the world is of something greater, we have the power to nudge the world in that direction.

Mark Twain said, “You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.” People of hope live not only by what we think our eyes see, but the better world we can imagine. A world where soup kitchens box up their pots and pans because everyone has enough to eat. Where unemployment offices become a distant memory because everyone has a job and a wage that is sufficient. Where people feel safe to offer different viewpoints because disagreements are arbitrated without resorting to violence. Where every child grows up in a loving home and thrives in classrooms that provide a quality education. Where people of every race and religion become neighbors and Friday nights become feasts as they gather together around a table. Where generous hearts overcome greedy desires and nations no longer need the tools of war because all countries are committed to peace.

Author Parker Palmer says, “When privileged people like me choose hopelessness over hope, it’s not a reflection of the state of the world. It is a reflection of the state of our souls.” When faith grows thin, cynicism and despair find a path into our hearts. We grumble about the way life is and lose sight of God’s dreams for the world. But when we tend to our spiritual lives, love and joy take root and hope becomes a driving force. The church is vital to the future of our world because it stubbornly insists that a better world is coming and God calls us to be partners in creating better lives for all.

Poet and preacher Victoria Safford writes, “Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope – not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges; nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right,” but a very different, sometimes very lonely place...the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it might be, as it will be... and we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing.”¹

Another way that hope is kindled is when God's Spirit stirs in our soul and the thought arises to consciousness: "It does not have to be this way." It does not have to be this way not only because life is always susceptible to change, but also it does not have to be this way because God empowers us to get up and do something about it.

The Church is to be the leaven in the loaf that is society. We are to be a force of light that spreads compassion, advances justice, and promotes peace. People of faith can do this because we are on the side of what is right and true and good, and because we are not alone in this project of improving life for all.

"At the end of one of his books about the history of human civilization, Thomas Cahill, turns toward the future with an honest and clear eye, writing: 'As we look out across our earth we see many signs of despair – poverty, hunger, a population explosion of enormous proportions that we Westerners insist on ignoring...' But then, he begins to sound like a biblical prophet, when he observes 'we also see signs of hope...The future may be germinating today not in a boardroom in London, or an office in Washington, or in a bank in Tokyo, but in some small outpost or another – a warmhearted orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta...an easy-going French medical team at the starving edge of the Sahara; a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own Great Hunger, a nursery program to assist convicted mothers at a New York prison. The future may be germinating in some unheralded corner where a compassionate human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way.'"²

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, on the day of Pentecost, a mighty wind blew through the lives of the first disciples, and they remembered the words of the prophet Joel who said that God's Spirit would be poured out. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions."

In the church, we do not accept the state of the world as a given. We glimpse visions of the world as God intends for it to be. Those visions infuse us with hope for a better day and the determination to join God in making it a reality.

NOTES

1. Victoria Safford, "The Gates of Hope."
2. Agnes Norfleet, quoting from Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, "Christ, Be Our Light!" November 27, 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of all creation — who ordered the swirling chaos and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who sculpted the mountains and filled the earth with good things — *you* hold all life in your hand.

We can scarcely believe that You — Lord of the cosmos — became flesh and lived among us! Yet, so great is your love for us that you entered into our brokenness. We rejoice that the One-in-whom-your-fullness-dwells drew near to us as a babe in a manger, that we might abound in hope.

During this Advent season, we wait for you to draw near to us again, and we watch for glimpses of your new creation. We watch for the day when predator and prey dwell peacefully together; when the vulnerable thrive, and the powerful seek equity; when the nations thirst for righteousness, and all creation flourishes.

For many of us it is hard to await your coming with hope and joy, for there is so much that defies your vision for creation ... In this time of gathering darkness, when day fades quickly into night and the shadows of despair descend upon many, we seek your light in every corner of our world:

Send your hope upon those who are weighed down by injustice or weary from grief. Send your peace upon neighborhoods torn by violence and communities embroiled in conflict. Send your joy into hearts that are broken or lonely, and your love upon those in need of compassion. Fill each of us with your hope, your peace, your joy, and your love, that we might bear witness to the one who comes, who is the light of the world. Give us courage to carry Christ's light into the world, until sorrow and sighing flee away and every parched place breaks forth in song.

We pray trusting that you are the one who wipes away every tear, who comes to set your people free. So, with the confidence of your children, we pray as Christ taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**