

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 8, 2019
Theme: Are We There Yet? Hope
Title: Finding Hope in the Desert
Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

I spent time with some colleagues this week and inevitably the conversation turned to “what are you doing for Advent?” We were asking each other what approach we were taking for Advent in our preaching and worship design. One pastor is doing a series of sermons on Christmas movies. Another is looking at the various characters in the Christmas story. Another is doing a series on the 300th anniversary of the song “Joy to the World”.

When I sat down to prepare today’s sermon, I found myself asking, why I had decided to stay with the lectionary – the assigned readings for Advent. You can’t get much less Christmassy than John the Baptist preaching in the desert and yelling, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

The Discipleship Ministries website reminds me that on a long journey, not only will someone ask, “Are We There Yet?” but others will either question or wonder, “Should we turn around? Do we really want to make this journey?” “Questions about who made the decision, why we are going, and what’s this all about anyway are all a part of the journey – the desert part, the questioning part,” the part where we wonder if there is any point to continuing.ⁱ John the Baptist ranting and raving about the wrath that is to come doesn’t make this journey feel any easier.

I found myself asking the questions – “Is it too late to change what I’m doing? Could I, should I do something different?” But the most important

question for me in preparing worship and writing a sermon is always, “Is there a word from the Lord? What does God want us to hear?”

God has an interesting way of getting my attention when I least expect it. Friday night I had a sermon prepared but it felt like there was something missing. Saturday morning, I read a devotional from Jan Richardson. Jan is an ordained Methodist pastor currently living in Florida. For many years, Jan and her husband Garrison Doles combined her gifts of visual arts and words, and her husband’s gift of music and produced some amazing worship resources.

All of that changed in December 6 years ago when her husband died. Jan continued to share her art and her words along with her pain, her anguish and her deep faith. Everything in her life had changed over a period of just a couple of weeks.

Yesterday I read these words from Jan. “As we approach the second Sunday of Advent, we hear again those words about a way that is being made, and a call to make ready for the One who will travel it toward us. In a season that gives us a stunning constellation of hopeful tests, this one strikes me as one of the most hopeful of all.”ⁱⁱ

That caught my attention. Had I read it wrong? How could this passage about John the Baptist in the wilderness be one of the most hopeful passages of Advent?

Jan continued, “This one strikes me as one of the most hopeful of all; that in the wilderness, amidst whatever chaos and uncertainty it holds, a path is being made for the One who comes to meet us, who persists in seeking us out again and again.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This from a woman whose husband died not long before Christmas – a woman who we might expect to find Advent and Christmas to be a

particularly difficult time of year. And yet, she finds John's message to be one of the most hopeful messages of Advent. God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus, to prepare the way for God's love embodied or incarnated in Jesus. In this case, John was not talking about preparing for the birth of Jesus. This is the adult John preparing for the adult Jesus to begin his public ministry, In the verses immediately following today's reading, Jesus comes to John and asks John to baptize him.

John proclaims that he is a voice crying in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." It's always easier to travel a road that is straight, that doesn't zig and zag or turn back on itself. It's always easier to travel a road that is smooth rather than one that is bumpy. And yet, John is a voice crying in the wilderness – frequently understood in the Bible to be a place where there is no good, where God seems to be absent.

The wilderness is not a place where anyone would voluntarily choose to be, and yet, in the Bible, it is often the place where God reaches out to show love and concern. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of people coming to a new understanding or new way of life after meeting God in the wilderness. After Jesus' baptism, he spent 40 days in the wilderness during which he experienced several temptations but emerged stronger and with great clarity about his ministry.

Many of us have had times when we felt like we were in the wilderness – times when nothing made sense, times when the questions far outweighed the answers, times when we have felt alone or abandoned, or filled with despair. God comes to us in the middle of those places. We may not recognize God's presence right away. Sometimes it takes looking back to realize that the friends who reached out were instruments of God's

love. Sometimes it is only in looking back that we realize that some of the unexpected things that happened during those times were ways that God let us know we were not alone, that we were loved and cared for.

Jan continues her thoughts about those wilderness times by asking, “And I wonder, what is the way that needs to be made ready in me, that I might meet the Christ who is already drawing close?”^{iv} What are the ways that we need to prepare; the ways that we might need to be more intentional about opening our eyes; the ways that we might need to open our hearts a little more to see that God is reaching out to us, the ways that we can meet Christ in our lives today?

Jan finds this passage to be one of the most hopeful because it is in “the wilderness amidst whatever chaos and uncertainty it holds that a path is being made for the One who comes to meet us, who persists in seeking us out again and again.”

Hope is often found in the middle of the pain or the wilderness because that is the time when it seems that nothing else can sustain us. We find hope when we discover that there is nothing else to do except lean on God. We often use the word “hope” casually. I hope that the electricity will be on when I get home – and I expect that it will be. I hope that I will finish my Christmas shopping on time – and I expect that if I exert a little effort, that will happen.

Real hope requires more than this. Real hope is something that comes out of a struggle, something that may not seem possible at the time. Several years ago, after a long two years of not being able to stand up straight or be without back pain, the hope that I would one day be pain free came out of despair and suffering. It was a hope that came out of knowing that there was nothing else to do except lean on God; a hope that dreamed

of possibilities that seemed so remote as to seem impossible. “Pain often leads to hope because it requires hope. What else can sustain us when life is hard?”^v

When life seems impossible, when the wilderness seems unending, the prophet Isaiah shows us the vision of what God can and will do. In the middle of the wilderness, either literal or symbolic, John is preparing the way for Jesus, making the path straight for the One who will fulfill Isaiah’s vision. Jesus is the one on whom “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest, ... the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge.” (Isaiah 11:2)

It is a vision of a destination yet to come – a world promised to the future. It is an invitation to “measure ourselves by that vision and promise.”

The UMC Discipleship website proclaims that “No one articulates that vision better than Isaiah. That is why we come back here year after year – to sit at the feet of the one who can tell a story like no one else. In a dog-eat-dog world, we need to hear of lambs and wolves” living together, leopards lying down with baby goats. “We need to hear of the calf and the lion and the fatling parading along after that little child, like Simba and Timon and Pumbaa singing ‘Hakuna Matata’ through the jungle.”^{vi}

It’s a beautiful vision isn’t it? Animals that are normally enemies living peaceably together. Can you even begin to imagine a vision of a world where Democrats and Republicans are working together for the good of all people in our country? Can you imagine a world where there is no war, and where governments think not only of what is best for all the people in the world? Can you imagine workplaces where people truly work together in teams and encourage and support each other rather than looking out for their own career advancement?

Can you hope for such a world? True Advent hope expands beyond our personal hopes and includes looking forward to the well-being of others. John Wesley, the person we call the founder of Methodism, saw those who were oppressed and suffering around him and he went out to where they were. He went to where the needs were so obvious that people had to be honest about them; where they didn't think they had to put on a good face and pretend everything was okay.

Hope in the Advent story comes in the form of a major shift where everything gets turned upside down. Hope comes to Mary and Joseph in the midst of the world being turned upside down. Hope came to Elizabeth and Zechariah who had not been able to have a child – and who finally became parents in their old age. Hope came to shepherds out in a field.

Normally big announcements are made by important people, but in the Christmas story suddenly people were listening to smelly shepherds proclaiming the great event of Jesus' birth. Suddenly men were traveling from the East to come and see a baby embracing a new story of hope.

Everyone in the Christmas story needed to act. The Advent invitation is for us to also act. John calls us to repent – literally to turn around – and look at where we have been, where we are, and where our journey invites us to travel. If we listen to John, if we listen to Isaiah, if we listen to the Christmas story then we begin to believe in the possibility. If we begin to believe in the possibility of hope, then we begin to act in ways that help to bring about that possibility. We can ask with Jan Richardson, what needs to be made ready in us, so that we might meet the Christ who is already drawing close?

The Board of Laity has a brochure that proclaims that our primary responsibility as congregations is to bring HOPE to our communities. I

think it provides some good steps for us along this journey to Hope that is about more than just us.

The four letters in HOPE^{vii} stand for Hospitality, Offer Christ, Purpose and Engagement. It invites us to ask questions along the journey.

Hospitality is the first step in bringing hope to our community. We are invited to ask ourselves, “What would happen if our congregation began to pray, ‘Send us the people no one else wants?’ or ‘Help us receive the people you are sending to us?’”

We are to “Offer Christ” by “offering opportunities (for people) to make a commitment to Christ. Bringing HOPE to our communities means knowing our Purpose. Knowing why we do what we do. If we really know our purpose, know why we gather for worship, why we bring offerings to God, why we study the Bible, why we share prayer concerns with each other, then it is easier to Engage others. It is easier to “develop relationships in the community with local schools, with persons living in poverty, with health care facilities,” with other community groups.^{viii}

Ingrid McIntyre writing about hope in an Advent study summed it up this way, “Over two thousand years ago, Hope showed up in a baby, the best symbol of hope there is! Hope was laid in a manger – literally a feeding trough – a sign that generations could feed on this Hope to keep going. God showed up in the last place anybody would choose to give birth, showing us that no place on earth is beyond Hope’s reach.

“We need to be open to those we meet along the way who show what hope looks like in different places. Each of us carries a piece that is meant to be shared.

“Sometimes those we meet whether in person or not – remind us of what hope looks like when its inclusive of everyone. This kind of hope can

change unjust systems and the world! Mahatma Gandhi gave hope to people on the margins who thought they were powerless and together they experienced power greater than any one of them could have manifested alone. Martin Luther King Jr brought hope to those who had systematically been subjugated for hundreds of years, and they are still liberating us today from a culture that's often hope-defying.

“Hope travels. When one person gets it, a string of others catch it.”^{ix}

My prayer is that on this Advent Journey we will continue to seek Hope, Real hope that makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

ⁱ www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship Are We There Yet, Hope, Preaching Notes

ⁱⁱ Richardson, Jan The Advent Door. Advent 2 - 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid

^v McIntyre, Ingrid in Almost Christmas Chapter 2 “An Altogether Hope” p.49

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} HOPE brochure, 2017, www.gbod

^{viii} The pieces on HOPE come from their brochure.

^{ix} McIntyre, pp.56-7