

Kirk of St James
Sunday December 3, 2017 (First Sunday in Advent)
Sermon "An Apple a Day"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Today we celebrate the first Sunday in advent--hope. With a topic as uplifting and welcome as hope we know there are a plethora of passages in the Bible that would be excellent to examine. So imagine my surprise when I turned to the lectionary and the passages all dealt with weeping and lament. Doesn't the church know this should be a time of rejoicing? Why are we spending time on these topics at all?

The curious thing about hope is that it is often born out of weeping and lament. Hope tends to rise from the ashes and remind us that there are other possibilities. The very nature of hope itself is that it is a state of longing for something more. Hope is a feeling of desire or expectation for something to happen. Hope can sometimes be a double edged sword because we know that few things feel as gut-wrenching as unrealized hope. When we are desperately hoping for a particular outcome we sometimes find ourselves muttering under our breath "don't get your hopes up." For that reason I believe that hope is both one of the most important aspects of our faith, and also one of the most complex, which is why Isaiah is the perfect study. On a side note on hope Chad was really hoping our street would win the "Frosty Your Street" competition. The winning street would have an 8 foot frosty the snowman installed on every lawn. I was hoping Pownal Street would not win because I kept picturing the wind we have been having lately with a dozen 8 foot snowmen bouncing around. Again the dual nature of hope!

Coming back to Isaiah we find ourselves in the middle of a communal lament. Isaiah is trying to reconcile the hope of God with their current situation. This passage has been described as "a cry of pain seeking understanding." Isaiah starts the passage today by describing the way God worked with the Israelites when He called them out of Egypt. Those were the days. When God's word made the mountains shake, and His presence was visible and at work among his people. He was a cloud of fire and a pillar of smoke. He sent food in the desert and parted the Red Sea. He spoke with Moses face to face, and could be found among his people. Now however, God has hidden himself from the Israelites. He has allowed them to be carried into exile, and the rebuilding of the temple is not yet insight. The community who at one time never doubted that God would carry them through difficulty is now no longer sure he is there. "God, if you would just tear open the heavens and make your presence known again then everything would be fine." We may live in a modern world but, we likely understand the same sentiments. We look at the world around us and think "if you would just give us a sign, everything would be okay." Make the mountains tremble, do some awesome deeds, do anything! Where is the hope in the world?

The Israelites took God for granted. Perhaps because they felt that he would deliver them from whatever hardship they found themselves up against. Maybe it was because they did not think that following God was all that important. Or, perhaps it was something else altogether, maybe they became comfortable and complacent and didn't really think God's word was still relevant. Most likely it was a combination of all these and other reasons not even mentioned. When Isaiah talks about God hiding his face it suggests a couple things, first that God cannot be contained, and He is not at our beck and call. The second is that the Israelites must make a

choice to follow God again--their actions do have consequences and they have responsibilities that they cannot turn away from.

The Israelites want a miracle, they want to be back in their own country, their own homes, and have their temple rebuilt. This period of waiting does not fit into that immediate hope. As I have mentioned before Rev. John Claypool has suggested three types of miracles in the world. The first is the immediate answer to prayer like the parting of the Red Sea when the Israelites were pursued by an army. The second type of miracle is collaborative, sometimes God's works with us to achieve an answer to prayer, it is a miracle where we both play a role like when God sent the Israelites manna and they collected it. The third type of miracle is the one that is least impressive but, often the most common. It occurs when God gives us the strength to simply live in the moment, and to hope in the face of difficulty. That is where the Israelites currently are. They must continue to trust in God in the midst of difficulty and know that there is hope because God promises that he is faithful. There are miracles yet to come. One day they will suddenly be released back to their homeland and with the help of God they will rebuild their temple. Through moments when God is obvious and other moments where it feels like he is hidden we trust in God's unending love and promises to us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp concluded that such experiences reveal God to us; in fact "it is a reflection of the divine character, a divine determination to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of noncoercive love and suffering service rather than through domination and force."

As another theologian said "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 being the same God today, yesterday, 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. The tradition of biblical lament does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the future in despair; rather it draws the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future."

Hope lives on, even in the most difficult circumstances. Advent jolts the church out of its routines and reminds us to think of new possibilities. It is a time to open up our lives and our hearts with active anticipation and renewed hope. "We live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world." The Holy breaks into the daily in countless ways. This advent season may God speak to us in new ways, may he encourage us, and may we find ways to offer hope in the world. May we dream new dreams, and share God's caring and compassion with those around us. There are countless ways each of us can share hope in the world! I would like to finish today with a quote that I have shared with you before but, this advent season seems particularly relevant. These words come from Martin Luther who said "Even if I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." Friends live in that hope, and plant your apple trees each day!