

Advent People
Isaiah 11
Nov. 29 2015
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Thanksgiving kinda snuck up on me this year.

I mean, I realize that's ridiculous -- it's actually a very predictable holiday, that whole fourth Thursday of November thing is pretty well-set.

And yet, somehow it wasn't until this past Tuesday that I finally grasped that in fact Thanksgiving dinner, which we were hosting, was a mere 48 hours away.

And I also grasped that I was in trouble.

I didn't actually have a *plan* for dinner ... nor, for that matter, did I have a turkey. Or really, any relevant groceries.

The contents of the fridge in the parsonage right then consisted of yogurts of questionable age and some cold pizza.

Tuesday afternoon.

I needed to shop, obviously.

You know what I think I'll do, I said to David, I think I'll get up, like, really early tomorrow morning and get to the store before everyone else.

That's a great idea, said David. There's only one problem with that.

You never get up early.

I had to admit that was true.

Okay, I said, I'll go to the store tonight. After I figure out what we're having.

So, Tuesday evening after dinner, I went online.

Foodnetwork-dot-com. Hurriedly printed out a bunch of recipes, leaning toward anything with the word "easy" in the title.

Then I got completely distracted by Facebook, because there were more than the usual number of funny cat videos posted, it seemed.

And thus it was that it was close to 11 p.m. before I began my trek through the aisles of Stop and Shop.

But hey, Stop and Shop's open 24/7, so no problem.

Except.... turns out it's not any more.

At 11:50 p.m., with my list not completed, I heard an ominous voice over the loudspeaker.

We will be closing in 10 minutes. Please make your way to check out.

But you're open all night! I wailed to a store clerk.

That was years ago, she said.

So I need you to picture now a store empty of all customers except for one frantic minister with a cart loaded to the brim, careening wildly through the freezer section, grabbing green beans and Cool Whip.

Stop and Shop did actually close with me still in it,

surrounded by a whole host of remarkably kind-hearted staff.

getting me checked out and bagging while I singlehandedly lengthened their workday.

Did I get everything I needed?

Heck, no.

Was I back in the store on Thanksgiving Day for a few missing items?

Yes. Yes, I was. I saw some of you there.

I tell this as a cautionary tale, folks.

Everything about the story I've just told

is everything I *don't* want us doing as a church in Advent.

That whole letting the big-day-sneak-up-on-you thing, that lack of preparation,

that cramming everything needed into a whirlwind of chaos, this is what we are **not** to do, people.

But I'm not talking here about grocery shopping, meal-planning.

I'm not talking about gift buying.

If you want to do all that on Christmas Eve, go right ahead.

I'll probably see you at the mall.

What I *am* talking about is what we do spiritually during Advent.

I'm talking about preparing our spirits, our selves, our souls,
for what's just around the corner.

Because it's a pretty big deal that God chose to be born on earth with us,
it's a pretty big deal that God decided to be human with us,
and it's worth taking some time getting ourselves ready for that concept.

Advent is actually a very cool idea.

I have no idea who came up with it,

some Christian folks long long ago who said

let's not just get all excited on *Christmas*,

let's take, say, four weeks *ahead* of Christmas to get ourselves in the right place
spiritually for the birth of Christ.

And I don't exactly know who was the first to come up with the lighting four candles
idea,

this Advent wreath notion -- I guess I could Google it, probably should --

but *it's* a great idea too --

the idea that we light a candle each week,

and that each candle *means* something, something for us to think about.

Something that helps us remember the gifts of the Messiah,

and the longings of our hearts.

Today it's the candle of Hope.

Today, four weeks out from Christmas,

we pause, we still our hearts, we listen for God's whispers,

and we light a candle of Hope.

And we listen, as we just have,

to the beautiful words of longing written by the prophet Isaiah,

who lived in a dark and hard time,

but who hoped a hope so powerfully real that he could see it:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, he wrote,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

No one will 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.

Isaiah hoped a hope so big --
hoped for a Messiah who would teach the world how to live,
hoped for a Savior who would bring an end to all hurt,
hoped for a time when the earth would be so full of the knowledge of God
that the lion would lie down with the lamb, and love would win.

In Advent, we remember that we too are called to hope big hopes,
to dream big dreams,
to look toward that time when the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the
waters cover the sea.
The first message of Advent,
as we slow our spirits down to prepare,
is that we are to be people of Hope.

I'll tell you what -- I've already heard the word Hope an awful lot around here in this
past week.

For instance:

Last Sunday morning, at our Christmas market,
there was a table covered with beautiful bags,
hand made, woven with care,
woven by women in Bridgeport who are all, each one of them, refugees from war and
oppression.

Behind the table was Cynthia Davis of Fairfield,
whose friendship with and love for these women was what created 'Our Woven
Community', as their little enterprise is called.

"I *hope* it's going well," said one of our Mission Board members to her.

"Yes," she said, "thank you -- you have no idea how much *hope* this gives to them."
Hope ... and more hope.

That evening, our Junior Pilgrim Fellowship, 6th and 7th graders,
carried all the food that had been donated over these past few weeks into the Memorial
Room and piled it onto tables.

They sorted it all out -- vegetables here, stuffing there, desserts over here --

and then they got to work putting together Thanksgiving dinners, filling big Ikea bags -- that was Marcia's great idea -- with everything a family would need for a great feast.

Meanwhile, another handful of kids sat down to make the ornaments for the Giving Tree, the tree that's out in the Narthex right now.

And in our prayer circle afterwards, this is what the kids said, over and over:

"I hope the families love the meals we put together."

"I hope the children I made the ornaments for are so happy this Christmas."

"I pray that what we did gives them, like, hope, you know, because someone cares about them."

Hope, and more hope.

And yesterday, David and I went down to Ludlowe, to the Sticks for Soldiers fundraiser -- the effort you gave so generously to last week.

60 teams of teenagers playing in a lacrosse tournament, to raise money for the young soldier who sat and watched them from his wheelchair, smiling widely -- a double amputee whose needs are immense.

We talked to one of the dads who started this years ago, one of our own church folk.

"Our hope," he said, "was that our kids would understand what soldiers their own age are going through, and to help them do something about it.

Our hope was that we'd help them just to see, and to care. And give them hope ."

More hoping, and hope that has taken root.

The first message of Advent is that we are to be people of Hope.

That means, yes, that we are to be people who give hope:

who find those are hurting and give hope --

whether a hungry family just down the street,

or a refugee woman seeking self-sufficiency,

or a wounded soldier smiling bravely from his wheelchair.

We are to be people who give hope.

But most of all, we are to be people who *ourselves* hope.

We are to be people of hope,

dreamers like Isaiah,

believers in what can be,
people who live in that restlessness of expectation that looks to the future and sees that God is there.

To be people of hope means looking at this world with eyes that see a vision of God's kingdom,

to believe that injustice will not win out,

that evil can be answered by a divine 'no',

that love and life are, in the end, God's triumphant 'yes'.

To be people of hope means living with the knowledge

that we are never alone,

that there is nothing we go through on our own,

that there is no shadow into which God's light does not shine.

To be people of hope is to give hope, to be hope, and to live in hope.

And where do **we** find that hope?

Where do we find the hope that strengthens us?

In a baby, born in a manger,

the child of Mary and Joseph.

In a man, a friend, a Savior,

who came among us with compassion and healing, teaching us love.

The gift of Jesus, the gift for which in Advent we wait with patient expectation,

IS the gift of hope.

The first message of Advent is hope.

I want to close with a little story of hope,

a story that was quietly being told in the midst of our market last week.

Among the crafts laid out on the tables there were glass ornaments like this one, each carefully hand-painted.

More than a decade ago, a member of our church family, Greg Ambrosio, was on a business trip in Amman, Jordan.

He went out wandering through a bazaar one day,

and that's when he met Hagob Kokozyan,

selling his glassware, beautiful glassware.

Greg bought up a whole bunch of it,

and gave me a call.

"I've got something for the Christmas market," he said,
 and so it was that we had Mr. Kokozyan's glassware in our market that year.
 Greg, who has long since moved from Greenfield Hill,
 kept in touch with him over the years, and their friendship grew ...
 they call each other brothers now.
 This year I heard from Greg again.
 Do you still have the Christmas market? he asked.
 Things are really tough here for my friend Hagob.
 His wife's not well; he's supporting his daughter and grandchild,
 and tourism is way, way down.
 He was hoping that maybe you would like for him to paint some more.

Yes, I said. Yes, of course.
 And so it was that on one corner of the table last Sunday
 there were these ornaments.
 Painted in hope by an elderly man in Amman,
 who was *given* hope by a member of our extended family, Greg,
 and by all of us who said yes.
 Ornaments of great fragility from a *region* that seems so fragile,
 a place that calls on us to hope,
 and to work in hope.
 And on each of these ornaments, if you look carefully,
 you'll see a *sign* of hope from Mr. Hagob Kokozyan:
 the spires of churches and the domes of mosques painted side by side.

I started this sermon with a story of my unpreparedness,
 my rushing around in craziness.
 I invite you in this holy season to do the *opposite*:
 to slow down long enough to live in expectation,
 to listen with care to the messages of Advent,
 to open our spirits to what is coming,
who is coming:

The child of Bethlehem,
 the Savior whom Isaiah longed for,

the One who is the gift of hope,
the One who offers us hope,
the One who calls us to be hope.
Amen.