

HOPE is an essential piece of what is needed in Advent, Hope with a good-sized portion of PATIENCE. In a culture which knows the words to sing Christmas carols before Halloween, where the Day After Thanksgiving Black-Friday Sales carry on for a month, where everything is pushbutton, prerecorded and instantaneous, it is hard for us to have Patience to HOPE. Patience requires waiting.

I confess, when I am in the Grocery Store this time of year, I hear the Salvation Army bell ringing outside, I have my 9 items in the 12 item line, and I have my Credit Card out ready... When I get behind someone, all of whose 30 items have been scanned, the total appears, and they look incredulous at the register, then they reach into their purse, inside of which is a billfold, inside of which is a Credit Card... and I am almost willing to offer "Could you just put those things on my card, so we can get on with it..." but I am a pastor in town, recognized as being a pastor, and need to be patient, to wait and to HOPE.

At Advent it is hard to be Patient, to be HOPEFUL. ADVENT is all about Patience and Waiting. Whether you are a 5 year old obsessed with a special gift, or a Grandparent counting the days until reunion with family, or you have been diagnosed as a patient having to wait to see a doctor, to have a procedure, doubtful anything can be better. Patience, Waiting, Hoping: What if CHANGE could be better instead of just change.

I love Henri Nouwen's description, "Waiting, as we see it in the people at the beginning of MARK is waiting WITH A SENSE OF PROMISE. A Promise that is already begun in us." For these people in Advent, Waiting is never a change from Nothing to Something. ADVENT WAITING is always a MOVEMENT from "Zechariah...your barren wife Elizabeth is going to bear a son." "Mary, You are to conceive and bear a child, and your Cousin Elizabeth is already 6 months pregnant." Advent People who wait, have already received a promise which allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow.

It seems we can only really WAIT, if we can HOPE what we are waiting for moves from something to more.

At one point, I went to Montreat in the Mountains of Western North Carolina, have you ever been there? Montreat was the home of Ruth & Billy Graham. They described traveling through the mountains one day, as they found themselves in mile after mile of construction. There was one-lane traffic, detours, stoppage. It was frustrating. Finally, they came to a Road Sign. Ruth declared to her husband: I want the words of that sign on my Tombstone! The sign read: END OF CONSTRUCTION. THANKS FOR YOUR PATIENCE.

We live in an era of CHANGE, Transitions, we wait with a sense of PROMISE and HOPE. Do not be demoralized, when the world does not seem a peaceful place. Do not be discouraged when ANXIETY rules your heart and CONFUSION pervades the mind. We were told it would be so. Those who walked with GOD before us, knew this same dissonance. YET they listened for a harmony at the heart of the universe, they took the Bread & Cup into their hands as a sign of GRACE; they blended their voices in singing; they discerned a truth that was the JOY of human desire; they dreamed of a PEACE the world could neither give nor take away; a GIFT, about to be revealed to us in just a short time, the gift of WHAT IF.

We have received the Prophecy of Isaiah, as if one lifetime, even the tenure of one Priest, when the prophecy spans over 300 years! The first 39 Chapters of Isaiah cover the 60 years leading up to 700 BC, all while Assyria was destroying the Northern Tribes of Israel. For the next Century, those words were preserved, as the community of faith looked backward WITHOUT HOPE of a FUTURE, experiencing only LOSS, what felt like a time of GOD's Judgement.

What we describe as 2nd Isaiah Chapter 40-55 comes from the Exile of Judah, from the 60 years, 600 to 538 BC as the faith community questioned whether it might be more prudent for ONE individual to suffer as a Sacrifice for the Nation, from which we have the image of a SUFFERING SERVANT.

Chapter 40 comes as if ROYAL DIVINE DECREE of CONDOLENCE & COMPASSION, Not that we paid for our Sins, but that we have been REDEEMED by another's HOPE for us. The idea here is not that we bought off our debt, deserving freedom and forgiveness. The Nation deserved its suffering, HOWEVER GOD CHOSE to CONSOLE simply because of GOD'S GRACE. The final 10 Chapters of Isaiah narrate the conquering of Judah's Conquerors and their return from exile to live in the ruins and rebuild.

300 years! How long is 300 years? Imagine individual sermons collected from the Salem Witch Trials, through the Enlightenment, the years of the American Revolution, invention of the Telegraph, Radio, Steam Engine, Western Expansion, Electric Lights, Air and Automobile, Internet, now Space exploration. At any individual point, human experience could have ceased, becoming content with all that had been. This is the DISTINCTION between FAITH & HOPE. Our Faith, our Beliefs, Practices, Traditions come out of what we know, what was accomplished and is certain from our past. HOPE is trusting in the possibility of the Future, WHAT MIGHT YET BE IF, IF only we can wait and Witness the IMPOSSIBLE become POSSIBLE. The real difference being how much emphasis we place on the preface of the letters I M, recalling that I AM is the Ancient Name given for GOD, with whom all things could become possible!

Our congregation stands on a precipice of HOPE. For 45 years. We have had the largest and most incredible Choirs of any church in the region, and for 45 years the Choirs have not heard the sermons, memorials, even themselves clearly; I have often been concerned that their inability to hear the Preacher was the reason for the size of our Choirs! Recently, working at one development at a time, HOPING and refusing to give up hope, our CHOIRS can now hear! For the last 30 years, the Ice Maker has made working in the Kitchen Deafening, and with the purchase of a \$7.50 plug, it is now possible to Smell and Taste and share over the Sound of the room. These have been very dark and troubled days... How many reports have we had of fighting and terrorism, mass shootings, wars, honor and revenge? We can feel very helpless. Yet, this week, we did something! On Friday we gathered with the other faith communities of Green Valley, for Christians and Jews to Stand together, to pray and sing together for PEACE and LIGHT in the world. Did it change anything in history? Probably not, but for the believers who gathered, praying together was a sign of HOPE. Can we return to being the 1600 member congregation of our Nostalgia probably not, as GOD continues to resurrect our numbers as fast as we welcome one another, but we can HOPE and TRUST and work for a future of what might be IF.

There is a subtlety to the GOSPELS, often overlooked. Greek Culture, later the Roman Legion marched over the Empire of the WORLD, when suddenly appeared John the Baptist in the Desert. This lone voice, this Prophet dressed like Elijah emerging out of the wilderness. Who called the world to HOPE; and people from every walk of life came forward to Confess and to be Baptized, to believe in something more and different. John had his disciples, and Called believers to a great deal more and different from their secular world. Then John's cousin Jesus came out of Nazareth, a Galilean of Palestine, and John recognized that he had been CALLING people to: follow the one who would come. It was as if when Jesus came, John diminished into the background. How difficult it is to carry responsibility, then trust others to carry on?! Yet that is what it means to HOPE! Not that we need to control and have everything our way. To believe that GOD may yet do something we never imagined. No matter how glorious and successful our lives, we each of us are only INTERIM, preparing the way for what GOD WILL DO NEXT.

Finally, the other day I was reading an account of a man and his family driving on a hot South Carolina afternoon and they saw a sign for a U Pick Peach Orchard. He doubted anything could attract his family out of their air-conditioned comfort, but he pulled over, paid the admission fee and selected a bushel basket. As the family set off into the orchard, the man at the entrance, who himself looked as wrinkled as

a Peach Pit called out, "If you want better, go deeper, the peaches on the fringe have been picked over, but the deeper you go, the better the fruit." So they walked way down the row, but as they set down their basket to reach the first fruits, the voice called out: "Go deeper." So they went further, every time they stopped, the voice echoed "Do not settle, go even deeper, the best is yet to come." "We did as we were guided, going right into the depths of the orchard, and we found the old man was right! The plumpest, finest peaches were untouched and waiting for us."

Are we only skimming the surface of Advent, of Christmas, of all we could hope for?

CS Lewis described "If we let GOD, because many choose to prevent GOD, but if we let GOD, GOD can make the feeblest of creatures into the most dazzling, radiant, immortal of beings, pulsating with energy, vibrance, joy, wisdom and love, we cannot yet imagine; reflecting GOD to the world. The process will be life-long and at times painful, but that is life, nothing less, if we will HOPE in WHAT IF."