

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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December 11, 2016  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

### Old Hopes, New Hopes

The story is told of Pablo Picasso, early in his career. Like many aspiring artists, he was living in Paris in the early 1900s. His friend Gertrude Stein, an American expatriate writer, was also young. She sat in his studio for a portrait, some say as many as 90 times while Pablo painted and repainted. When the portrait was at last unveiled, it shocked their circle of artists. Instead of a young, uncertain woman, there on the canvas was a old, strong, and wise woman. "She doesn't look like that," they protested. Pablo responded, "She will." (From Joan Delaplane, "A Future Full of Hope," *The Living Pulpit*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1992, p. 15)

Like the artist, the prophet Isaiah gives us a picture of the world, not as it is now, but as it will be. Like the artist, he looks beyond current reality and sees what the future holds. And for Isaiah, that visionary view of the world is the gift of faith. He paints a word picture of the world that God is making. He sees the horizon of history colored by his knowledge of God's goodness, and his trust in God's promises. And that vision inspires hope.

The first people who heard Isaiah's prophecy knew well the meaning of "desert," for they lived in it or near it. Between ancient Judah and Babylonia lies the Syrian Desert, which includes both semi-arid land like that which we know in our part of the world as well as hotter, drier expanses where very little grows. That was the land the Judeans crossed as they were taken into exile in Babylon, and later as they returned from exile to their homeland. So when Isaiah says the desert will blossom, there will be streams and pools and springs of water, even swamps where rushes and reeds thrive, he paints a picture that defies their experience. Yet his ancient audience would also have known that there are places on God's earth more hospitable to life, places like Carmel, where thick, rich soil supports lush vegetation, and like Lebanon, where trees grow tall in thick forests, and like Sharon, a fertile coastal plain. So for those whose vision was limited to what was right in front of them, he offers a vision of real places in the world where life thrives, and such flourishing gives glory to God. And in that vision, he lifts up the promise of God: this is what God has planned for you.

Isaiah's vision, God's promise, is even more than the transformation of the world around us. It is also very personal. The suffering of individuals in Isaiah's time was quite real. Just look at the suffering of those who live in underdeveloped nations today, and you will see not only shorter life spans and nutritional deficiencies, but also much higher rates of physical disabilities than found in countries where prevention and treatment are available. I sometimes wonder if our high rates of mental and emotional suffering and addiction take the place of the physical suffering of those in less developed countries. Yet Isaiah's vision, God's promise, is that the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like deer and those who have no voice will sing for joy. If Isaiah's listeners had responded to his proclamation with "The world doesn't look like that," in faith, he would have replied, "But it will."

Because Isaiah's vision is God's vision, and not only that, it is God's promise. The hopes and fears of all the years (one of my favorite lines from one of my favorite Christmas carols) haven't changed much since Isaiah's time. We still yearn for a world where life thrives, where peace reigns, where justice is the way all people and nations govern, where joy and gladness rule and where sorrow and sighing will be no more. Old longings have become new longings. What Isaiah gives us is a vision which, if we trust in it, will prevent those long-held hopes from turning into cynicism or despair. He

helps us look beyond what is right in front of us to the future God has in store. His words help us hold onto new hopes, hopes we are willing to help transform into reality. So that when our critics tell us, "You're a dreamer, give it up, the world doesn't look like that," we can reply with assurance, "But it will."

Hope is the hallmark of Christian believers, for our vision is inspired by Christ. Perhaps you have been infected by the epidemic of cynicism and despair in our world today. One definition of cynicism is "an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others." Cynics are suspicious because they believe that people are always driven by self-interest, at the expense of others. Our recent election season provided ideal conditions for cynicism to grow in us. And when cynicism infects our thinking, we are prone to despair, the complete loss of hope.

Christians, however, live by the triumvirate of faith, hope, and love, what St. Augustine called the three theological virtues, which are inseparable and dependent on one another. By faith, we know that God is; by love, we know that God is good; and by hope we know that God will work out God's will. (Delaplane, p. 14) In explaining Christian hope, Augustine further observed, "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."

(<http://www.beliefnet.com/quotes/christian/s/st-augustine/hope-has-two-beautiful-daughters-their-names-are.aspx>)

So when we live by hope, we are angry, for instance, at the unequal distribution of the world's resources, and we are courageous enough to give up what is excessive in our lives so that others can have enough. When we live by hope, we are angry that war is used as an answer to the world's conflicts, and courageous enough to try peaceful solutions. When we live by hope, we are angry that this beautiful world is being ravaged by human greed, and we are courageous enough to change our habits of consumption. When we live by hope, we are motivated by a future in which the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice, which we want to be part of making happen.

Switching to today's New Testament reading, when we read John the Baptist's story, we might hear more of his anger than his courage, but both are there. "Repent!" he preached in the wilderness, not in any lush garden area of Palestine. And in today's story, John is in prison when he relays his query to Jesus, "Are you the one we've been waiting for? Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God?" He's in prison because he spoke truth to power, he named the wrongdoing of the king and his wife. He's in prison because he was angry and courageous and he lived by hope, trusting that his life was ultimately in God's hands.

But notice Jesus' reply, how he lifts up the vision of Isaiah and claims that God is already accomplishing God's intentions. The blind can see—for Jesus has healed them. The lame can walk—for Jesus is lifting them up. The deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and not only that, but the poor are hearing good news proclaimed. In Jesus, God's promise is made real, right before their eyes. In Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is happening. In Jesus, the future hope is present and powerful, turning the world upside down!

My friends, this talk of hope is all theoretical unless we start doing something about it. This vision of the future God holds before us is beyond our grasp unless we start to reach for it. Our anger over the way things are will turn to cynicism unless we enlist its sister, courage, to join hands with one another and with Jesus in God's work of transforming the world, and transforming individuals. It doesn't matter to me which of the world's many injustices, which suffering most motivates you, but what does

matter is that you live your faith, hope, and love for more than your own self. That is what Christ asks us to do when he tells us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves—to live with passion the love God gives us in Christ, living into the intentions of our prayers.

So I am compelled by the words of pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes, who reflects on the question of John the Baptist to Jesus, “Are you the one?”

Someone you may not have noticed is waiting,  
longing for healing, for justice, for hope.  
You only mean to be passing by,  
but they see you.  
And even if they don’t know they are asking,  
they are asking,  
“Are you the one?”  
Not necessarily the Messiah,  
but perhaps one to bring hope,  
to be a light in the darkness.  
There may be someone in some kind of prison  
looking for some kind of encouragement,  
someone longing for healing or appreciation or forgiveness.  
Will you be the one, or should they wait for another? . . .  
Will you be the one to shine light in their darkness,  
or are they to wait for another?

Sit still in the grace of God.  
Let the light that is dawning for the world  
dawn in you.  
Let that light grow and radiate.  
Bear it with you through the day.  
You will meet someone who seeks grace,  
who longs for a sign of hope.  
And for them  
you will be the one.  
( Dec 6, 2016, [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net))

Dear ones, as we take joy in the voices and the spirit of the young people who today sing praises to God for our listening ears, we are the recipients of their hope. They bring us light in our darkness. As we absorb the vision of Isaiah into our way of being in the world, we are the recipients of his hope. He renews our faith in the power and goodness of God. As we remember the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, the healing he brought to the world and continues to bring to us now, we are the recipients of his hope. And as recipients of this great hope, we cannot keep it to ourselves. It bursts from us like springs in the desert, like leaping deer, like the ransomed people we are who joyfully return to God singing praises. It lives in us, as we take note of all the points of light, the turning of the world toward God’s way. And it becomes real in the world as the reign of God taught and preached and embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ grows and thrives.

The world is not yet the place of joy and gladness, abundance and peace God desires. But one day, I promise you in the name of our God, it will be.