

Hope Springs Forth

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46-55, Matthew 11:2-6

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Julie Emery

Larchmont Avenue Church

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*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

*No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The mind of a child is filled with excitement during this time, even if our adult minds are not so much. If you are like me you are hard pressed to find joyful moments amidst the lists of lists of things to do and accomplish, from decorating the house to buying presents. I marvel every year at how many things we try to pack into these few weeks in December leading up until Christmas.

There are those - and they are blessed - who plan ahead and have their shopping done and lists checked off. And each year I have brief moments of hope to be one of them. I just haven't gotten there yet. But this year I had the wherewithal to at least break out the advent calendars, so that we could count the days together with excitement, even if we haven't gotten the tree yet.

This weekend marked the arrival of the fifth advent calendar to the Emery household. Two were gifts from Connecticut cousins and tell the story of the birth of Jesus or the famous poem "The night before Christmas" in small window panels with chocolates hidden behind them. One is a wooden peg board with figurines for each day, as the manger scene gets created slowly but surely over the course of the days of December.

But this weekend a box arrived from the Michigan cousins holding a thrilling treat: Two sets of 24 presents, each of which holds a small, plastic Playmobile piece to be placed in a special spot on wintery cardboard scene. Since these advent calendars arrived on December 9, you can imagine the scene was like a mini Christmas as the boys opened 9 presents each and placed them carefully onto their snowy diorama. Each had a Christmas tree, and then there were owls and rabbits, baskets and skis, even Santa and Mrs. Claus.

The next two days, however, haven't been as fun, since opening only one present in one day just doesn't live up to the excitement of 9 presents in one day. Not to mention that a certain eldest child already peeked ahead and knows that on the 14th he will open

Santa's sleigh, has been begging to jump ahead and open it today, right now, this very moment! It is terribly hard to wait.

Is it patience or just experience that makes it a bit easier for us as adults to wait for the coming of Christmas? December feels more like a marathon than a sprint, and so we take each day at a time, packing in parties and shopping, decorating and caroling. We wait, with all the passiveness that word holds, marking each day in the slow walk toward Christmas.

Author Rodney Clapp calls Christmas "the numbing season." Citing the "expectations of obligatory Christmas cheer" he points out the flood of commerce, the travel and the visits to family, spiked with all the stresses attendant upon such endeavors, and the added church responsibilities of nativity programs, Christmas Eve services and so forth. "No wonder many of us are likely to dread Christmas almost as much as we look forward to it," says Clapp. But... perhaps the numbness isn't only the busyness of the season. Perhaps the numbness is partly that we've lost touch with just what we're waiting for?

The prophet Isaiah, in our passage this morning, speaks to a people in exile words of hope that describe the coming of the Lord. The book of Isaiah was written, as we learned in our adult education class last week, in a time of great turmoil for the Israelites. The passage he read just a bit ago speaks to the people of God living in exile in Babylon, as the people of Israel wait with eager anticipation to return home. They have seen the destruction of their homeland, the burning of the temple of the Lord. They have been crying out in longing. Isaiah has been a mouthpiece of the Lord, speaking words of wrath and judgement upon the nations who strayed from the way of the Lord, asserting that exile is the necessary punishment given to Israel for their sins.

But all is not lost - Isaiah tells of the return from exile, along a highway called the Holy Way. The path home is through desert but the desert will rejoice and blossom at their return, the dry land will burst forth with streams and pools of water.

Isaiah begins with a vision of creation in bloom: the crocus peeking up out of barren ground, the desert bursting with blossom. Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses in this way:

Wilderness and desert will sing joyously, the badlands will celebrate and flower—  
Like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom, a symphony of song and color.  
Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift. Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts.  
GOD'S resplendent glory, fully on display. GOD awesome, GOD majestic.

For Isaiah, the Advent of God is linked with the rejoicing of all creation, beginning with the very soil and ending with the joyful redemption of all humanity. Gather the weak, he says, "Be strong! Do not fear!" for God is coming. The eyes of the blind shall be opened... the ears of the deaf unstopped... the lame will leap like a deer..." Isaiah's prophesy ends with the homecoming of "the ransomed of the Lord," who will return to Zion with singing...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away..."

In Matthew's gospel, when John the Baptist sends word to Jesus from prison he asks the question: "Are you the one who is to come? Or shall we wait for another?" And Jesus answers with this same imagery from Isaiah 35: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." "The world is transforming before your very eyes..." Jesus seems to say... "do you see it?"

In Luke's gospel, Mary too rejoices in a world transformed by the coming of a God who fulfills his promises from generation to generation, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. The advent of the Lord, the appearance of Emmanuel, God-with-us, is nothing short of God's glory revealed in and around us. The joy with which she sings is palpable - the joy of experiencing God's work in the world first-hand.

And yet...here it is thousands of years later and many things have not yet been transformed. The blind still stumble without sight, the lame and deaf, the poor are still with us. Many of us move through the darkness of grief, mourning the loss of loved ones. This is the tension of the Advent season - the Christ has come and is still coming. God's Kingdom has begun and is not yet finished.

Last weekend, a group of teenagers and adults drove into New York City to hand out clothing and food and a little bit of humanity to our brothers and sisters living on the streets. It was one of the coldest nights so far this winter, and we all felt it. The cold crept up through our shoes and into our fingertips as we stood along streets near the library or on the corner by Penn Station, and men and women formed lines to see what we might have to help them fight the biting cold.

We served somewhere around 80 men and women that night a week ago, and one commented that Larchmont was known on the streets for bringing "the good stuff." They raved about the soup, they shared stories of how they planned to stay warm - riding the subways or in darkened places in Penn Station. They shared about children

they loved, or hopes they had, and for a moment at least - sorrow and sighing was pushed aside for warm friendship and kind words.

When we got back to LAC we all commented on it - the cold - and what was lurking, I think, in all of our minds was the simple fact that we all had somewhere to go to get warm. We would head back to our houses and our beds, but where would these men and women go? Had anything changed for them? Had we done anything that helped? Certainly the one young man, Ricky, who rolled up in a wheelchair, did not "leap like a deer" as we left him that night. No blind or deaf man went away seeing and hearing.

And yet - there on the city streets, a bunch of teenagers filled the hungry with good things. "The good stuff."

"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...it shall be for God's people, no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray..."

The world has yet to be transformed fully into a place where deserts bloom and paths through the wilderness are safe from beast or robbers. Our lives travel rocky roads touched by grief and brokenness, illness and tragedy, pain and suffering.

The justice that Mary sang of - one where the proud are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts and the lowly are lifted up - these are things that in many ways we still hope for, still anticipate, still long for in the depths of our souls.

If we believed that THIS was coming, if we truly believed it, wouldn't we count the days with excitement? Wouldn't our waiting, be, well... different?

Writer and artist Jan Richardson points out how "so often we associate waiting with passivity and idleness. With boredom and dullness. With a sense of helplessness in the face of time that seems to stretch out interminably." Indeed, sometimes waiting is an act of discernment or prayer, sometimes waiting is necessary. But "sometimes we wait too long."

Isaiah and John the Baptist and Mary each are in waiting, they are waiting for the advent of God, the in-breaking of the one who is to bring justice, the one who is to make a highway in the desert, who will come and save. And yet none of them waits with passivity.

Mary's waiting is a part of an active "yes," as she allows her own life, her own body to be overshadowed and wholly transformed by God's coming into the world. Isaiah and

John spend their time of waiting speaking out against injustice, actively reminding those around them of the hope that is coming, the God who is breaking into our broken and hurting world to make known.

It is a waiting that understands the coming of God as participatory - For if God is to make a highway then our hands, our strength will be needed. It is a waiting that understands the coming of God as incarnational - because if God is to be born, our bodies will need to be a womb in which God can dwell. It is a waiting that understands the coming of God as engaging, because the work of the kingdom is our work as well.

Every act of feeding the hungry, every act of lifting up the lowly, every act of speaking truth to power or standing up for what is right, every act of reaching out to the lonely or caring for the grieving, every time we baptize, every time we profess our faith in the face of a dark and broken world

...Is an act of advent waiting

...Is a seed planted from which joy and hope shall spring forth in dry land

...Is a moment of opening that little door with excited anticipation,

...to see what is yet to come.