

Hope In The Darkness

December 3, 2023

Advent Hope

A week ago Friday, the church office was closed, so the folks who restock the Blessing Box, our little free food pantry on the north east side of our building, needed to make alternate arrangements as to how to get in. Mary Hemminger, who really does a stunning job as our Blessing Box coordinator has a key, so she and Marty Berry made plans to meet, so that the box could be filled. They assumed, rightly so, that after the holiday, the cupboard would be bare. Neither of them could have expected what awaited them. Taped to the doors of the box was this note:

I live in the local neighborhood here. I have a job. I work full time in fact. With the cost of rent, car payment, insurance, fuel, food, etc., these donations have literally kept me alive these last few years. You've really impacted my life in a positive way. By next year, I should be making enough to give back to this loving community. God bless everyone involved with this.

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face.
May the rain fall soft upon your field.
And until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

Sincerely,
Anonymous

Mary and Marty were stunned. It's not that they were surprised that the Blessing Box makes a difference, but there was something about that card. Maybe it's because someone took the time to write it. Maybe it's because the writer shared some of their story – they live in the neighborhood, they work. Maybe it's because they noted the longevity of their patronage – they've been accessing the Blessing Box for years.

All of those elements are profound, but I think that what brought tears to my eyes is the hope expressed in the card. Yes, gratitude is the overall theme, but in the line that reads, "By next year, I should be making enough to give back to this loving community," there is such hope. All is not lost. This predicament I'm in isn't forever. Together, with my work and your support, things are going to be different.

Scriptures

As we step off into this season of Advent, this season of preparing for the birth of Christ once more, our first theme is hope. This hope isn't a wish – I hope for a particular present or for snow on Christmas Eve – but an unquashable belief that life can move in a positive direction. To understand what this Advent hope is all about, it's helpful to look to our scriptures for today. Let's start out with our Gospel.

Today we read the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark's Gospel does not include any sort of birth narrative or prelude. In Mark, we don't find any sort of Christmas story whatsoever: no genealogy of Jesus, no dream, no angels, no Magi, no star, no angel, no shepherds, no Mary, no shepherds. We jump right in with the story of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, quoting the Book of the Prophet Isaiah which tells people to make straight their paths for God's arrival.

It's funny how we as adults jump back and forth between literal and symbolic language so easily. Last week, when my family was sick, my daughter learned the phrase "frog in your throat," and spent much of one evening with a flashlight and her mouth open, looking in the mirror. When both of our scripture readings talk about making our paths straight, I think most people's heads go to some sort of behavior modification – but let's be a bit more literal for a moment. Those of you who are older than I am remember a time before the interstate system in this country. Sure, there were smaller highways, but they would meander through small towns. There were twists and turns and stop signs. It wasn't unheard of to miss a sign and get off track. And, getting from point A to point B took a lot longer. By creating a clear, relatively straight path, transportation in this country was revolutionized.

This image is helpful as we try to understand what Advent hope is and what Isaiah and John the Baptist were saying. When Godspell tells us to "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord," we're being told to make it easier for God to get here. Clear away all that might make someone stumble. Make it a direct route, rather than meandering. Ease the path. How do we prepare for Christmas? By making the path easier, both for God to get to us and for others to get to God. Remember, a highway is not personal. A highway benefits us all, collectively.

Perhaps what I find most compelling about our passage from the Book of Isaiah this year is the context in which this portion was written. This passage is the beginning of what is called Deutero-Isaiah. While most scripture scholars believe the first 39 chapters of this book were written by the Prophet Isaiah, this second portion was likely written much later while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. The reason this is interesting is because it was a hopeless situation. The Babylonians had waged war in Israel, destroyed the temple (which was central to Jewish worship and cultural life), and had taken them into captivity.

The Israelites are beyond despair, and it is to them that this passage is written. All seems lost. Everything you counted on has been turned upside down. Nothing works the way you were taught it does. To this, the LORD proclaims, "Comfort, comfort O my people! Make a highway for your God." The passage goes on to tell us very poetically that there are still going to be hardships, that life will hold things that wither and fade, but that what will never fade is the love of God. And in all of this, our tasks are laid out before us. We are to comfort people, tell them that their hardships aren't God punishing them, and prepare a highway for God to get to them. Make it easy for God to get back and forth.

Conclusion

Sometimes, making a path for others looks like contributing to our Blessing Box. Sometimes, it means sending treats and a message of encouragement to the folks at the National Railroad Museum who have been being harassed by some folk with a limited worldview and exclusivistic

tendencies. (If you don't know what I'm talking about, look back in your email and read my column in Friday's This Week at Union.) Sometimes, making a path for God includes an extravagant undertaking. One of our members, Ward Bacon, is a retired school teacher. As he has learned of deep humanitarian need across the world, he has responded. In fact, Union's Gifts and Memorials ministry has just granted \$6,000 toward the work that Ward is doing to provide generators to provide heat for Ukrainians who are displaced because of the ongoing war on their country.

Sometimes, making a path for God is much closer to home, when we, by our kindness or our words of comfort or by our truth telling clear a way forward. Emily Dickenson wrote that "Hope is a thing with feathers." That means hope is fragile. But it also means that hope moves us forward. Hope is not stagnant. Hope cannot be pinned down.

Daniel Horan writes that Advent hope:

"finds its meaning not in escapism or superficial optimism, but the powerful sign of divine love contained in God really entering the messiness, the painful, suffering, broken world in which we find ourselves."

He goes on:

"This Advent, I will be thinking about what it means for Christ to enter this world in solidarity with the Israelis and Palestinians, Ukrainians and Syrians, Ethiopians and Afghans, and so many others caught in the violence of war and conflict; in solidarity with the LGBTQ community that continues to be marginalized, abused and killed, especially trans people of color; in solidarity with refugees, migrants and undocumented people seeking safety across the globe; and in solidarity with all others who are powerless or forgotten."

Friends, we've got a lot to do to prepare for the coming of our savior. And if we're diligent, we may have time to check some things off of our Christmas to do lists, too.

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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