

Hope Dealer

December 1, 2024

Micro-Dosing Hope

By a show of hands, how many of you have said something in the last two weeks about it getting dark out so early these days? It's a natural phenomenon. It's literally as regular as clockwork, and yet somehow we seem to be surprised by it every year. And, depending on how we're doing psycho-spiritually, the encroaching darkness can seem to affect us differently year by year.

Now, you might imagine that, being a pastor, I'd be a stickler for liturgically appropriate Christmas observances. And for the most part, you'd be right. As Haley and David and I have been planning our music for worship, we've stuck to the rule of programming Advent music all of the way up to the Christmas pageant. I've always hidden the baby Jesus from my nativity set so that he doesn't show up until Christmas Eve, and the Magi also are hidden until Epiphany. If the place I'm living in has a space that works well for this, I even make sure that the Magi are hidden somewhere East of the manger, so they'll literally be travelers from the East. Of course, Christmas decorating, Christmas music, and Christmas pajamas are all verboten until the day after Thanksgiving.

But...desperate times call for desperate measures, and so if you've driven past my house this year, you have seen that we started decorating in early November. As the days grew shorter and both literal and figurative darkness was closing in, putting up our Bluey and snowman inflatables a month early was a deliberate, spiritual act of resistance.

My very favorite verse in all of scripture is John 1:5:

“The Light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.”

Putting up reindeer and singing songs of joy and peace has become, this year, an act of resistance for me, as in doing it I am defiantly declaring that the darkness is not going to win. The darkness is not going to overcome the light. Not on my watch.

The Scriptures

Our scriptures today are apocalyptic, as Advent always starts. In our reading from Jeremiah, the imagery is that the chosen people of God have been chopped down, like a tree, wholly and completely decimated. And yet, if you've ever spent time among trees that have been cut down, in time, new growth springs up. The Prophet Jeremiah is telling us that amidst devastation, all hope is not lost.

Similarly, in our Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus tells his listeners:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

(Luke 21:25-26)

Everything is going to be shaken, shaken to the core. But then, Jesus reassures his listeners:

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

(Luke 21:33)

Last spring, I was at a continuing education conference with a colleague. She had stickers on her water bottle, as is the trend these days. One caught my eye, though. It said, “Chaplain to the apocalypse.” I needed to learn more.

She said she actually had the stickers made herself after reading a book called “The Next Apocalypse” by Chris Begley, an archeologist who teaches survival skills. She expected it to be a book about prepping for the end times. You know, how much water to store in your underground bunker and the like. Instead, she said she was profoundly surprised by two themes in the book.

“First: Major changes in civilization, that is apocalypses like the collapse of ancient empires are never as fast as they seem when we learn about them hundreds of years later. Those on the ground just continue with everyday life and roll with the changes.

Second: Surviving an apocalypse and massive change happens because of community, not individuals. We can’t hunker down and prepare our way out of a crisis. We need each other.

This is exactly where we in the Church are called: To love God and love our neighbors. To build communities that care for everybody, especially with an eye on those who are most marginalized, as we navigate changes in our world.”

(Breanna Illene)

I started to write that this last year has seemed like an apocalypse, as so many people’s racism and hatred and bigotry has been exposed and so many trusted, indeed celebrated institutions have betrayed us, but then thought back to the human experience of the pandemic, and so started writing that these last five years have seemed like an apocalypse, but then remembered Trayvon Martin, the young black man who was murdered while walking home from a convenience store with a bag of Skittles, and so started writing that the last 12 years have seemed like an apocalypse, and then thought back to the first take away my colleague shared: “major changes in civilization, like the collapse of ancient empires, are never as fast as they seem when we learn about them hundreds of years later.” When you’re on the ground, facing the fall, the decimation feels cataclysmic.

Advent

The role of the church in all of this, and indeed the practice of Advent, is to walk with people in hope, reminding others that they are not alone, even if it means keeping just one fragile flame alive. Historian Howard Zinn said that pessimism tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we relentlessly imagine the worst possible outcomes, if we concentrate on all the things that are falling apart and going wrong, it cripples our capacity to make constructive changes. He wrote:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It gives us the energy to act.”

On the flip side of that, Noam Chomsky chimes in:

“Optimism is a strategy for making a better future because, unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so. If you assume there is no hope, you guarantee there will be no hope.”

(Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky via Rob Brezney)

Conclusion

Many of you are familiar with Emily Dickenson’s poem, “Hope is the thing with feathers.” I’ve quoted it here before. It’s beautiful. AND as I was re-reading it in preparation for lighting our Hope Advent candle, it seemed...too clean, too Pollyanna. Then I came across this counter-poem:

Hope Is Not a Bird, Emily, It’s a Sewer Rat by Caitlin Seida

Hope is not the thing with feathers
That comes home to roost
When you need it most.

Hope is an ugly thing
With teeth and claws and
Patchy fur that’s seen some shit.

It’s what thrives in the discards
And survives in the ugliest parts of our world,
Able to find a way to go on
When nothing else can even find a way in.

It’s the gritty, nasty little carrier of such
diseases as
optimism, persistence,
Perseverance and joy,
Transmissible as it drags its tail across
your path
and
bites you in the ass.

Hope is not some delicate, beautiful bird,
Emily.
It’s a lowly little sewer rat
That snorts pesticides like they were
Lines of coke and still
Shows up on time to work the next day
Looking no worse for wear.

So friends, what if I challenge you to be a hope dealer this Advent? What if I task you with getting people hooked on hope? Giving them a little bit, then a little bit more, until they’re hooked. I’ll promise you an unlimited supply if you keep coming back. I need you, no Jesus needs you, no the future of human existence on earth needs you to be peddling optimism,

persistence, perseverance and joy like they're Halloween candy and it's 6:45 p.m. and starting to sleet.

Two weeks ago, I encouraged you to micro dose hope. Today, I'm tasking you with giving it out by the handful. Treat hope like zucchini in August. Leave anonymous bags of hope on your neighbors' porches. Slip hope into everything. Ask your friends on Facebook if they have any new recipes for hope.

It may seem like I'm being flip, but really, I couldn't be more serious. There's a lot of ugly in the world right now, a lot of pain and suffering and meanness and greed. But I go back to the Howard Zinn quote I shared earlier. Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The people of darkness have doubled down on the worst possible outcomes, and that has hamstrung their ability to make constructive changes.

And so, I challenge you this Advent to be hope dealers. To be the tiny pin prick of light that not only refuses to let the darkness win, but that also illumines someone else's path. Go forth, distributing hope extravagantly, prodigally, into this world that God loves so much, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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