

A LIGHT FOR THE NIGHT

If you haven't figured it out from the songs and decor, today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation with a strong feel of desirable expectation. We know the routine, we've been here before, and we have a good idea how things are going to turn out, but even so, it is beneficial to go through the motions / to do the preparation.

This year's theme is: Bursting IN and Breaking OUT.

We will be invited, each of the four Sundays of Advent, to anticipate, explore and celebrate the unexpected ways God "bursts in" and "breaks out" in our personal lives and in the world around us.

Today's sub-theme is: Take heart. God is coming to make things right.

That is an encouraging and optimistic message of hope – **be at ease; God will be here to make things all better.**

Sounds very nice..... very hopeful,.... .. yet.... is that message true or just more seasonal *decor* we've come to expect this time of the year?
Is it real hope.... or just wishful thinking????

A man approached a children's softball game one afternoon. He asked a boy on the bench what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing—we're behind."
"Oh my goodness," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged."

"Why should I be discouraged?" replied the young boy.
"We haven't even gotten up to bat yet."

Did the little boy have hope?.....or... just naive wishful thinking?
OR....was he Way out of touch with reality? ????

There is more to hope, than just expecting or **wanting** something to happen. Quite often we confuse a **wish** / a dream with hope.
And, sometimes we are just out of touch with reality.

There are many things we would like to see or need to have happen; some are hopes and some are not.

A few examples:

Maybe our desire is to get into shape and lose weight over the holidays?

Maybe it is to improve our lot in life, to have more money and stuff?

Maybe the desire is a greater sense of safety and stability?

Perhaps it is the desire to see a just society, where the rich declare, “enough is enough; I don’t need anymore money” and the powerful use their influence to help the weak and not for their own benefit.

Maybe we want to see the rich nations of the world work to feed the hungry, instead of sponsoring more wars by selling armaments.

Many say we need the world’s leaders to care more about global warming, than supporting the profit margin of large corporations.

Some want us to consume less and extract less from the earth.

.... or perhaps, the desire / the need is more personal, such as healing?

The examples, are they each a wish a hope.... a far flung dream???

In Jeremiah’s time, the Babylonians have just levelled Jerusalem, and those in Judah must have thought that God had abandoned them.

Yet, in our text, Jeremiah speaks of God’s continuing promise to the people. The passage asserts that God will act; God will execute justice and righteousness.

Jeremiah presents an optimistic message for people enduring otherwise gloomy tidings.

It is the picture of the light at the end of the tunnel, suggesting to all to just hang in there a little longer.

We see that light as Jesus, yet that sure took a long time in coming. Jeremiah’s audience was long gone by then.

The Luke passage warns of all sort of travesties and natural calamities, and encourages the listeners to be brave and rise up when things get really ugly, ... because is when redemption will happen. And, everyone reads into this.... the return of Christ – the return of a stronger, leaner and more buff Christ.... who will finally bring justice and righteousness.

All of us here, today, take these prophecies / predictions in stride. We’ve heard them before, and so we..... smile and think....ah.... it must be Christmas time because we are talking about salvation promises again, with flavours of hope, joy peace and love..... How nice.....

Those who have given up on the church, those who no longer engage with the message... .. are more inclined to shake their heads and ignore all this fluff,..... and if forced to confront the messages they would strategically counter:

The people of Jeremiah’s time never lived to see the rescue.

The cavalry Never Came. The people were fed a wish.

Those skeptics would add that if “That Branch” was Jesus, then... what difference did he really make? For the average person looking for rescue, what did Jesus do.....expect promise to rescue them later,.... when he comes back.....AND..... that promise was 2,000 years ago,.... and people are still foolishly waiting.

I’ve heard those sort of dismissive remarks from people who mock the church’s visions of peace and justice as idealism and naive wishful thinking.

To be sure, we could declare that the Messianic message is really spiritual and not pertaining to the real world, but that excuse makes us look petty and insults the life of Christ.

The interesting part of this debate is that it seems that those outside of the church really do take the Biblical messages seriously,.... and I wonder if sometimes they take it more seriously than we do. ???

So, from today's theme, how do we take Heart... believing that God is coming to make things right?
How do we embrace this message as Real Hope....which is based on viable truth and the plausibility of the actual desired outcome? ???

The messiah did come in the form of Jesus, yet the world is still full of hate, injustices, wars and evil. People are still hurting and suffering. People are still praying to be rescued, and many long for the Bold Second coming of Christ.... believing that the next time will be it.

How do we reconcile this message?

How do we proclaim that war never brings peace, and that non-violence is the way that has the best chance of resolving conflicts? How do we do that without being dismissed as naive?

How do we give words of encouragement to those suffering and afraid?

How do we share that Jesus' way is the way to redemption and reconciliation....when so much of life seems dark and bleak?

OR....Are we just idealistic with wishful thoughts? ???

Before we throw up our arms in frustration and dismay, thinking that this sure doesn't sound like a nice Advent message, ... let us consider the whole message, ... and not just a limited view.

We are not so helpless. Moreover, throughout the Bible – New and Old Testament – we are admonished to participate in life / in the “Relationship” with God. It is not all God. We are not puppets and we are not whimpering victims.

God has empowered, equipped, enabled and inspired us, and more.... God has offered God's Spirit to be IN and through us... if we so choose to engage in life beyond our selfish reach.

And, yes..... there still exists evil in the world.

Humanity still hasn't learned of the futility of war.

The powerful still exploit the weak and try to control the rules, and greed continues to prey on too many people.

In spite of the warnings we are depleting and overheating our environment.

And,keeping all that bleakness in mind should give us hope!

Because, after all these centuries, we have NOT been overwhelmed.

The voice crying peace, grace, justice and love.... is still being heard.

We have not destroyed ourselves.

The ways of darkness and evil appear irresistible, yet a few committed and empowered people can make a huge difference!

Contemplating THAT truth / seeing that vision... should give us all a great deal of hope.

Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful , committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

In 1955, Rosa Parks decided to take a stand for justice by remaining in her seat on the bus, instead of moving to the back as people with “dark” skin were told to do. The 42 year old woman became the inspiration for many, and caused bigotry and racism to quiver. **One Person.**

Martin Luther King Jr. shared his dream and empowered people with hope.He was One person speaking out.

Ralph Nader, in the early 1960s, took on the behemoth General Motors for manufacturing unsafe cars, in this case the Corvair. **One person** and his small group changed the auto industry.

Mother Teresa committed her life to being Christlike in Calcutta. She ministered to some of the most desperate and needy people of the world. She organized a group of nuns calling them, the “Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta”, and countless thousands found healing and hope,.... and many more were inspired.

Mother Teresa said, “We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But, if the drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something. She was just one faithful person.

In the early 1980s, Ron Sider published a book called, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger. The book was about how our affluence and life style choices are making and keeping others poor. Such as, one third of all the tuna caught goes into making cat food,... while people go hungry.

A few progressives applauded his book, yet the interesting thing is that Ron Sider and his message of social justice is catching on in conservative evangelical churches in America. The acceptance of Fair Trade products is but one example of the response.

Yes, there is a lot of ugly out there..... Evil still exists and the demonic darkness can be very unnerving and even frightening, YET.....the amazing thing is that one small light can make a huge difference.

I fully realized the power of one light when I took a tour of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. At one point in the tour, deep down in a huge cave, the guide went over to a wall, and turned off all the lights.

Total darkness is powerful.

It is complete; however, the tour guide lit one match, and suddenly everyone could see.... a little. The darkness was overwhelmed by one small light.

That same principle works in life. A small light for justice and peace is more powerful than all the forces of darkness.

I’m not suggesting that victory and domination is at hand when a light appears, far from it. But, bringing light into the situation changes things..... in a big way, and for the good, eventually.

In 2003, I started to keep a light in my office window as a protest against America’s plan to attack Iraq. Others in the Kansas community joined in,..... yet I suppose the leaders in Washington didn’t notice the lights, and they chose to ignore the millions who marched against the war. Nevertheless, the story hasn’t been finished, yet.

We don’t know the outcome.... life is in progress, and I believe the light in the window was a strong message. And, as long as our country engages in war and destruction, I will continue to keep a light in the window.....mostly as a reminder to myself, to not give up hope.

As Samuel Rayan of India said, “A candle-light is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, ‘I beg to differ.’”

Another example about how a few people can alter the course of world history, in ways that are surprising.

In the 1950s, the interfaith pacifist organization Fellowship of Reconciliation launched an ambitious campaign to challenge the American people and government to look beyond politics and to feed the hungry. They organized a “Feed Thine Enemy” program, in which tiny bags of rice were sent to President Dwight Eisenhower at the White House, with a message concerning the famine in Communist China. The message said: “If thine enemy is hungry, feed him.”

The program flopped. No one in the White House acknowledged the existence of the campaign, and it didn’t change the public silence on Chinese suffering. Hostility grew between the nations, and there was no alteration of any Chinese policy.....Except one....

A crisis arose over the possession of the islands of Quemoy and Matsu. China claimed the islands as did the US backed Taiwanese government. Taiwan and China were not friends, and the dispute was leading to war. Twice the generals advising Eisenhower recommended preemptive nuclear strikes against China, and each time Eisenhower turned to his aides and asked how many little bags of rice had come in. Thousands, he was told. The gesture of sending the bags of rice to the White House made an impact on the President. He was motivated to see the problem in terms of people instead of just borders on a map.

In deference to the opinion of so many Americans, Eisenhower cited the little bags of rice as the reason he ruled out nuclear weapons in this case.

The 18th century statesman, Edmund Burke rightly said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.”

Is our salvation up to us? ????

Are we saving the world by speaking out and standing up??

Far from it.....and we dare not flatter ourselves with such contemplation.

Salvation / giving hope where there was no hope / scattering the darkness with light.... Is a God thing!

We just do our part, and we must do our part..... and trust the power of the Light – God’s love and grace to do the rest.

If anything, we are as candles, and it is God’s Spirit that is the flame.

There is hope. God is active in the world..... and maybe in us, too.

God has come to the earth and God is coming to you and me.... to inspire / to illuminate us / to empower us..... so we can find our way in the darkness..... and help guide others, too.

We are not alone,..... and it really isn’t that dark out there, after all.

Oh, as far as Jesus and the Luke text: I'm not too concerned about the "next" life, and I don't need a "second coming." That stuff doesn't matter to me. The first was enough for me.

Jesus changed my life, and God's Spirit is still at work with and through me.
But, I'm just One person. I'm like you, and what good can just One person do?