

The Gift of Hope  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
November 29, 2020  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Listening to NPR on Tuesday I heard a doctor being interviewed about vaccines. While he made a point to say that the changes brought about by vaccines won't be like a light switch but rather a process, he also said that it will be better in a few months, and it will be better than that in six months, and this time next year it will be better still.

These are words of hope. Words of hope needed as we continue to live in the midst of this pandemic, as our days shorten and our weather turns colder, as we continue to miss people we haven't seen or hugged for months, as holiday celebrations get altered in ways that disappoint us.

These are words of hope that meet us in the midst of isolation, in the midst of grief, in the midst of depression and despair, and that encourage us, not to pretend those aren't real, but to look beyond our current situation and to envision a better tomorrow.

These are words that we need. Because even for those of us who are doing well in this strange time, even for those of us who are doing better than we deserve to be, still this time can be discouraging.

And so we need to be pointed to glimmers of hope, reminders that the end of the story has not yet been written.

And this isn't a new thing, but rather this was one of the roles the prophets had as well - to point people to the possibilities of what was not yet real.

As we've talked about before, depending on the situation the role of the prophets changed. Sometimes they were those who took the people to task for their bad behavior and unfaithful living. And sometimes they were those who spoke into the troubled lives of people and showed them a new possibility.

It is the latter that we hear from the prophet Isaiah today. As the people were watching their northern neighbors fall to the enemy Assyria...as they were helpless to change the bad actions and alliances of their unfaithful king...the word from the prophet pointed them to the possibility of one who was to come.

And this image met the longing of the people...people who were longing for peace and liberation, people who were longing for life and justice, people who were longing for a day when God's reign would come in its fullness.

And while it is likely that people in Isaiah's time connected this prophecy with someone closer on the horizon, someone like King Hezekiah, one of few kings in the Bible to avoid condemnation, Christians have long connected this prophecy to Jesus. In fact, we are so used to hearing these words during Advent and Christmas, not only in

All contents copyright of the author.

scripture readings at church but also in music like Handel's *Messiah*, that we often forget it existed before Jesus.

Because, for us, as those who follow Jesus, we see these things in him...we experience these things in the person of Jesus. After all when we hear the stories of his life we see one who brought justice and fairness. We see one who understood his mission as a liberator, as one who was to set the oppressed free. We see one who protected the weak and gave voice to those who were not allowed to speak, one who made room at the table for those typically left out. We see one who lived his life in a way to bring about peace.

And meanwhile, we know too well that not everyone listened or embraced the message of Jesus. So, here we are two thousand years later, living with the reality that justice and fairness, liberation and peace are not fully present.

Still we live in a world that is overwhelmed by conflict.

Still we see earthly leaders whose interest is in power and prestige, who are more likely to think of themselves than of others, who are working for their own interests and not for the good of the whole.

Still we see people being held down by the burden of poverty, beaten down by the rods of racism and sexism, plundered under the guise of national loyalty, imprisoned by those who choose war over peace.

And some days, whether because of the pandemic, or because of politics, or because of personal situations, things feel hopeless.

Yet today we are called to hope.

We are called to choose hope, even when it seems out of reach.

We are called to hear these words again and again until they feel less like a fairy tale and more like a reality we can help create.

We are called to live in the ways of Jesus, not just waiting for God to bring about some final conclusion in some other realm, but to live in the ways of Jesus, from the heart of God here and now in this messy and beautiful world.

We are called to act in ways that bring about peace and justice, and in doing so to partner with the prophets and with Jesus in bringing about the fullness of God's reign.

I remember when my firstborn was just an infant. As with most children there were moments of inconsolable crying. And I quickly learned that when those happened at 2am, in the darkness and isolation of night, they felt much worse than when they happened in the brightness of daylight.

Sometimes it is difficult not to be overwhelmed by the hard stuff of life, stuff that is real and that is painful. Yet, just like turning on a light or having someone else walk in the room often made infant cries less overwhelming, so too these reminders of hope *and* these challenges for us to help create the world of God's intention can change our experiences.

Friends, our experiences of isolation and despair, fear and depression, brokenness and polarization are not God's best hopes for this world. Rather, God shines the light of love and peace, justice and healing into all these places and asks us to do the same. The prophets have spoken and showed us the way...Jesus, in his life and ministry, showed us how to live from the heart of God...now we are called to carry on in ways that bring hope not only to our hearts and lives, but to the whole world. Amen.