

“The Gift of Hope”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 27, 2016
First Sunday of Advent

Readings from Scripture: Romans 13:11-14 and Isaiah 2:1-5

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:11-14

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Isaiah 2:1-5

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your word as sustenance and challenge and hope and for reflection. So as today we gather to worship you, may the words I share be a source of hope and wisdom. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

This is the time of year I always expect to get a little touch of S.A.D., otherwise known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. I think some of us do experience that, when the days get shorter, and in my case, out comes the Vitamin D and a reminder to find my happy light which is made in Alaska, of course. I also take comfort in the fact that I'm not alone. There is someone else in this congregation and she and I email each other at the beginning of this season and begin a count-down from daylight savings time to the 22nd of December, and then we tell each other we've made it through the longest night of the year and it's over. The light will come again. But it's true: in the midst of those darker days it gets a little difficult for me to get up in the morning. Indeed, the last

few months really haven't been easy for many of us. There's a lot that weighs heavy on our hearts. We see that the people of Syria continue to be killed by a king who fears more than loves his own people; that radical Islamists, whose very actions negate the gift of life, keep fighting. We've witnessed a difficult election and in its aftermath, we are aware that people of other colors or religions have been threatened by just a few. We have witnessed too many deaths in the streets including the death of another police officer in Colorado yesterday. So no, it's not been an easy year.

But, as I shared with the children, today does mark something new. It's the beginning of the new church year and we begin with Advent and go to Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and then what is called "ordinary time", and last week we ended the year with Christ the King Sunday. So today marks the beginning of a new year of opportunities and possibilities and we begin by lighting a candle, the candle of hope. I think in the midst of challenging days, it really is a gift to focus on God's gift of hope, and explore what it means to have hope for those we love, hope for the world, hope for peace.

I think both of the readings today are connected with aspects of hope. The reading from Romans focuses on the early days of the Christians, the hope they had that Jesus would return again, and soon. We know, though, that Jesus did not return as expected in those times, and yet in these days as Advent comes, we are supposed to prepare for the coming of Jesus once again. The words of Isaiah also speak of hope in the midst of despair. The first chapter of the book that comes just before this morning's reading has a lot of words of judgment about the lack of faithfulness of the people. Isaiah says they offer burnt offerings, but they don't follow the way of the Lord. Essentially, they talk the talk but don't walk the walk. The words tell the people to seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow. But they are not all words of doom and judgment, because as we move from here into chapter 2, a shift takes place, with words of a vision about things being made right. I think the two chapters are an interesting juxtaposition; one begins with a focus on their unfaithfulness, yet we find that's not the end of the story. There are not only just words of judgment, there are also words of restoration and reconciliation. The power of the passage is to open the door to something new. Hope, not only for the people of Israel, but interestingly enough, for people of all nations. For they are told if they get their house in order, the people of Israel will be an example for others. Other nations will learn from them and follow them and come to Jerusalem, and they will all know peace and righteousness.

So both passages speak to the reality and the challenge of living times in moments of darkness. For the Roman Christians, it was fear and grief—and hope offered them in the days to come that Jesus would return and they would not have to worry about the persecution of so many of them in the early church. In the book of Isaiah, there are words of judgment, yet there are words of hope. For the people of Israel it was a time of exile and despair, yet it's also a time to be offered words of hope for the future. So in both readings they flow from sorrow and despair to hope.

Now, we hear these stories also, from the past and for hope for the future. Because we experience the story of the birth of Jesus from the other side of the cross. We know about both the joy that comes with celebrating the birth of the child, yet we also know that Mary ponders these things in her heart. She senses she will know despair and sorrow in the days to come. Yet hope comes for us in Jesus' triumph over death and the light returns. I think that's the power of God's word, that in the midst of the challenges and difficulties of life, that is not the end of the story. God loves us and sent Emmanuel so we could experience hope in new ways. Indeed the power of hope is that in the midst of the darkness, light will come, sometimes in the most unexpected ways. We may find healing offered or dreams come true or new dreams experienced. Hope is the belief that light

can come into the darkness. The power of hope is that it can manifest itself in the most unexpected ways.

Not long ago I was reminded of a woman who I had not seen for some time, when I ran into her with some friends from the first church I had served. She had been a member there for a while and had moved away and transferred to a new church. She was back in town with her husband to visit old friends. We could all see that she was far along in a pregnancy and she looked so at peace in a way I hadn't seen on her face for a long time. After talking for a few minutes, we all gave her a hug and wished her the best and moved on. As we walked away, one of my friends said, "I'm happy for her, yet I am so surprised. I'm so startled to see she is pregnant. She and her husband had always said that they would never have children, that they were committed to their work and other things that were important to them." At first I was startled, too, but then as I reflected it became clear why this was happening. It made sense to me given what had happened to her three years before. She had worked very hard and was moving up the ranks in her field, but one day she came up to me. We didn't know each other very well. She asked me if we could go to lunch and we talked. She said, "I just want you to know I'm going to be out of town for a while. I'm using up all my vacation to help take care of my brother who is very ill." I asked her what was wrong and finally she said to me, "He has AIDS and he's probably not going to survive." She said she felt she really couldn't tell others about what was going on, because this was some decades back when the news about AIDS was "new news" and the diagnosis not a good one. Indeed, a few months later her brother died. She grieved and carried on, immersing herself evermore into her work.

But then the summer brought with it devastating news. Her twin sister died suddenly while swimming. She told me she was dreading going home for Christmas because she didn't know what to say to her mother and how they would get through the holidays. And I thought, "Wow, to go from a family of six to a family of four." I could see how hard that was. But seeing her pregnant made perfect sense to me. This child was the light coming into her darkness, an event not considered before the losses of her life. This child brought hope for the future, both for her and for her family. And what a powerful gift it was. God does work in mysterious ways, calling us out of the darkness into the light, sometimes speaking to us words of judgment, sometimes walking with us in the midst of grief. But that's only part of the story. God may speak words of judgment but also words of challenge and hope and reconciliation. Each time we confess our sins, it is a chance for a new day. For others of us, hope enters into the midst of our grief offering light for tomorrow. When our hearts are open, hope can enter in in ways we may never have expected. That is the gift of Advent, a season to remember and to prepare not only for the coming of the birth of Jesus, but to live out that promise in our own lives. The hope of a God who loves the world so much that we are called to be witnesses who acknowledge our call to bring light into the darkness.

So in this season of Advent, we begin the journey out of the darkness into the light. We are called to be those who bear the light of hope in a broken and hurting world. To be those who carry out acts of kindness whether in casseroles or Advent bags or by serving at Room at the Inn. Because then we become glimmers of hope in someone else's darkness. We are called to be those who remember that our God is a God of hope. Our God is a God of love whose Son lights our way. Amen.