

A Future With Hope

I just saw a couple of days ago that Starbucks is already putting out their Holiday cups! That doesn't surprise me since it's a business and Halloween is over. But what did surprise me was learning that a few friends of mine have decided to start decorating their homes for Christmas! One, who lives in an apartment in CT, has started to put up some her decorations. She anticipates being alone this Christmas and needed something to look forward to. She doesn't want to wait. Another friend decided that since the weather was going to be nice this weekend, he was going to go out and start putting up lights outside! A third friend plans to put up an artificial tree really soon.

As someone who usually waits until after Thanksgiving to decorate, when I heard this, I realized that this year, I'm okay with starting early too.

It made me think of a lovely Christmas song from the musical, Mame, entitled, "We need a little Christmas". Remember some of the lyrics?

"We need a little Christmas, right this very minute, candles in the window, carols at the spinet, yes we need a little Christmas right this very minute....we need a little Christmas now!

The stage play it was based on spans the Depression and World War II.

The way 2020 has gone, with the Coronavirus, an economic recession, a polarizing election and extreme weather, I think it's safe to say we 'need a little Christmas' this year too! It's been a tough year!

Deep down inside, when we say we need a little Christmas, perhaps it's a way of saying what we really need right now is little cheer, a little peace, a little light, and a little hope, maybe a lot of hope!

The past few weeks we've focused on faith, and love, and today, it's time to focus on hope. The scripture readings for today resonate with hope!

In Hebrews, which reads more like a sermon, the author summons his congregation, saying: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for the One who has promised is faithful". (Hebrew 10:23)

That last affirmation, "for the One who has promised is faithful", is key, *because God's faithfulness is the foundation of Christian hope*. Especially God's faithfulness in keeping promises. For Christmas is a celebration of God's promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ: especially, the promise of light coming into the darkness.

2.

During a six-month sojourn into Antarctica, Commander Richard Byrd, sitting in a metal hut at the South Pole, wrote: "I find that I crave light as a thirsting man craves water!".

The metaphor of life giving light shining upon God's people is the way that the Gospel of Matthew begins his account of the ministry of Jesus, after Jesus has left his home town of Nazareth and moved to Capernaum. Quoting a promise of the prophet Isaiah, Matthew writes: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light and for those who sat in the ...shadow of death light has dawned".

That promise of new life and new beginnings for the people of God is fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And with the coming of light in Jesus Christ, the hope of God's people is restored!

Hope is as essential to our spirits as oxygen is to our breathing.

In more than one eulogy for George Floyd, the reality of his crying "I can't breathe", quickly became a metaphor for the oppression of black Americans for the past 400 years. The weight of racism continues to crush the hopes of so many people of color in this country. That is why the Black Lives Matter movement has been able to restore hope for so many.

What is hope? Emily Dickinson compared it to a singing bird:

"Hope is a thing with feathers, that perches in the soul

And sings the tune without the words and never stops at all".

It makes me think of how elusive hope is. Sometimes it seems just beyond our reach and we hardly have the right words to express its meaning.

In 1986, Vaclav Havel, poet-philosopher, and late president of the Czech Republic, was asked "Do you see a grain of hope anywhere?"

Havel replied, "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Either we have hope or we don't-it's a dimension of the soul... Hope is an orientation of the spirit...the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons." There's more, but you get the idea.

3.

Mostly, we recognize how vital hope is at the times it is most lacking! That is perhaps why it is most often referred to in poetry or in the language of prayer- for example Paul's famous benediction: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing that we may abound in hope! (Rom 15:13)

There is also a close connection between hope and believing-hope and faith. It reminds me of a quote by Jim Wallis, the founder and the leader of the Sojourner's community who put it this way:

"Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and watching for the evidence to change". Sometimes God calls us to join in the struggle for change by joining others in pursuing peace, acting justly, putting our faith to work through love.

The famous medical missionary, Albert Schweitzer, once wrote:

"The relative good we do faithfully now are actually acted prayers for the kingdom." Those acted prayers, aligned with God's will, serve to stretch out God's kingdom now.

I am very well aware of how the events of life can nibble away at our hope- with anxiety, frustration, discouragement, loss, and sometimes just plain fatigue! Occasionally, we might just have our dreams shattered! Psalm 16 alludes to lying awake nights, but it doesn't dwell there. Instead, it goes on to pray that lovely line, "in the night also my heart instructs me". Clearly, this meditation was written by a real person who in spite of an occasional sleep-interrupted night, holds on to hope without wavering, trusting in the One who holds the future.

Hope is very much a by-product of faith- a faith which leans into the future, guided by God's dream for the future. The Bible contains the glimpses that dream shared by the classical prophets such as the one we heard earlier by the prophet Jeremiah. Speaking God's word to the Jews exiled in Babylon, hear what Jeremiah has to say:

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" Following that, Jeremiah shares God's plan to return the people of God from exile. To bring them home again!"

I believe God has a purpose for our lives as individuals and as a congregation. I believe God summons us to fulfill those purposes which serve the greater purposes of God.

4.

What are the spiritual gifts you have been blessed with on your life path? What helps you to get up in the morning, get dressed, and put one foot in front of another? Isn't it a sense, a conviction, a hope that our lives matter? That God has a higher purpose for our lives than just surviving and eking out a living?

For me it is knowing God's love. It is knowing that, regardless of what the future holds, I can trust that the future is in God's hands: and in that future love prevails! God's love for you and for all people.

Emily Dickinson's comparison of hope to a bird takes us back to the dove and another story from the Bible-the Baptism of Jesus. You remember how in the account of Jesus' baptism by John, the Holy Spirit was said to descend upon Jesus like a dove!

Jesus full of the Spirit launched not only his public ministry, but also the mission of the Church. We are baptized into that same Spirit and sent out in that same spirit to be a people of hope!

The Gospel reading this morning has to do with endings, the end of the age. As scary as these apocalyptic passages are, Jesus reassures his disciples that in these endings, are new beginnings. He said these signs are not signs of the end, but are the beginning of the birth pangs. That means what we have to look forward to is new birth!

We don't know for sure what the future will hold for the First Congregational Church of Blue Hill . But we move forward in faith, just the same, watching and waiting for God "to give us a future with hope"!