

December 4, 2016 2nd Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Isaiah 11:1-10

Watch in Hope

Without a vision, without hope, the people perish. When things are dark, and getting darker, that's when you need hope. This season, in Advent especially, we focus on hope. We wait in hope, we watch in hope, as the Advent wreath lighting rite reminds us today. But what is hope? What do Christians mean when they talk about hope?

First what hope is not, two things hope is not. First, hope is not rose-colored glasses. What a funny expression that is: "rose colored glasses," as if everything is improved by a little bit of blusher—my mother's makeup advice notwithstanding. Doing laundry (not my forte or something I usually do, and you'll hear why) I once accidentally washed one vibrantly red sock with a whole hot load of whites. Everything ended up embarrassed, infused with a truly unpleasant pinkish tinge, and altogether unwearable. Rose colored glasses would seem to cast the world in a warmer light, but it's an unhelpful tint. After all, when you wear rose-colored glasses, all the red flags just look like flags. Wearing such lenses means ignoring the actual if it is unpleasant. We know how well that works, and for how long. In contrast, Christian faith takes an unflinching look at things that are unpleasant: in the practice of self and social examination, in confession. Christian faith looks at sin and calls it out, spares no excuses. Think of John the Baptist. Undoubtedly, rose colored glasses have an appeal: something to warm up the view, soften the edges, something that helps you look at things as after a glass of rosé, or two glasses, or more. But once it wears off, the world is the same and your head aches, and you need dark glasses. Hope offers, hope is, something else than that.

Hope is also not optimism. Optimism may seem less willfully self-deluding than pink shades, optimism may seem an orientation and a decision to interpret a situation in one way rather than another. Think of the proverbial image of the glass: pessimists see the glass half empty, optimists see the glass half full. Some see lack: look at what we miss! Others see assets: look at what we have! This image is further extrapolated to say that some people just see problems, while others look for the positive—an interpretation that preferences the latter. I'm not sure that image of the glass of water actually supports that interpretation and preference. The amount of liquid does not change in either description. After all, both the optimist and the pessimist make accurate statements. They both see and correctly label the same quantity of H₂O. Actually, I think that image of that glass may serve us better if we take another look at it. Instead of pitting two sides against each other, instead of casting aspersions on the character of people who see things differently, the image could invite us to recognize different vantage points, that different people see the same thing in different ways. And it's important, after all, to know what you have, and what you don't. Hope is not optimism, because hope does not demand that we only describe things in a positive way. One can see and name what is missing, and still be hopeful. Sometimes it is the naming of absence that shows hope in clearest relief. We are missing something, Christians believe, we are missing something that only God can fill.

Seeing ourselves as such calls for humility, one of two things that hope is. A key quality that hopeful people have and display is humility. Both optimists and pessimists can forget this, both optimists and pessimists can get this wrong, can lack humility. Unassailable announcers of victory and ever ominous doomsday-sayers both lack humility; both think they have inside

access to the final word. Christians are open to a word outside, a word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the word of God called the Christ. Christians see the glass, that same glass that optimists and pessimists see, and note that here on earth, we see through a glass, dimly. Our view is limited. Awareness of limitation, openness to another is part of what Christians mean by humility—a hopeful, Christian value that is often misunderstood, mischaracterized and even maligned. Humility is not cowering, or disempowering, self-negating or even self-hating. Humility does not mean that one thinks poorly of oneself. The Christian writer C. S. Lewis put it like this: “True humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” Humility does not mean thinking you are bad, but that it’s not a bad idea to think of the many things there are other than you. There’s a hopeful, paradoxical thing that comes with humility, too: thinking about others is a good way to stop feeling bad about yourself. Moreover, and another paradox, attention outward invariably offers insight inward, into oneself. Jesus spoke of these things when he said that when you give up everything for the sake of the gospel, you gain everything, that when you lose your life, you save it.

These paradoxes: the paradox of humility and glory, of losing and gaining, of being empty and full, these paradoxes point to a second quality of hope: wonder. Hope wonders. Hope looks at things in wonder. This is its lens, this is how it watches. Hope wonders about big things, and little things. About where things came from and what they are for, even simple things: a glass of water. It didn’t just appear by itself, nor does it exist for itself. It came from somewhere, and it’s for something. In the case of a glass of water: drinking, hydration, quenching thirst, refreshment. And it came from a tap, from a pipe, from a holding tank and a treatment facility, from a body of water, from a cycle of rain and snow and melting and evaporation. The most basic things are a source of wonder, as are we, and our world, where we came from and what we are for: from somewhere and for something yet more vast and mysterious, a sea of time and meaning into which we just dip our toes, and into which God immerses us, and buoys us, in baptism. We are of a profound origin, and we have a larger purpose, hope affirms. As the Bible tells us, the genesis of life awaits full revelation. The future is head of us, still taking shape, a work in progress. How hopeless we would be if it wasn’t. Hope opens us up to the wonder that while we are products of history, and shaped by present forces, we also are agents of something still being created.

Hopeful, in humility we recognize that God loves us for what we are, and knows what we lack, and in wonder comes among us. This season especially we note it: the Savior’s birth brings hope to earth. Every year we say it: Christ is born. Christ is born not just at the end of every Advent, Christ is born every day, every moment, in the world around us and in us, in hope.