Building Hope: A Meditation

First Sunday in Advent 2019

Luke 1:46-55

*Hope is inescapably inconvenient and eventually dangerous.*

*Walter Brueggemann, Sojourners, July 2019*

Happy New Year! As I mentioned last week, Christians traditionally begin counting the new year from the first Sunday in Advent, which happens to be today. In part, we do so because we believe a totally new order of things happened when God, in the fullness of time, as St. Paul called it, sent the Son into the world. So, here we are once again, gathered to proclaim anew the good news of the coming of the Messiah.

Also, in tradition, we set aside each of the four Sundays of Advent with a particular theme: hope, peace, joy, and love. Of these, I think for most Christians, the meaning of hope is the most elusive. What, in our faith, does it mean to hope? In part, I believe our understanding is muddied because of how the word is used in common parlance.

For example, what does it mean when we say *I hope the Forty Niners (substitute the name of your favorite team here) win the Super Bowl?* Or, what does it mean when I say *I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow?* Or, *I hope I get a significant pay raise in 2020?* Or the mother of all the uncertain wishes: *I hope I win the Publisher’s Clearing House drawing.* All of these statements, and similar ones we make on a regular basis, mean we are not certain that what we are hoping for will occur, but we want it to be. It’s similar to expressing a wish. There is a sense of uncertainty that undergirds our hope.

Hope, in our faith, will have none of that. There is no sense of uncertainty when the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews declares: *Faith is the* ***reality*** *of what we hope for, the* ***proof*** *of what we don’t see. [Hebrews 11:1, the Common English Bible]* In a recent article, Walter Brueggeman gives voice to the biblical understanding of the nature of Christian hope. He lists what he calls ten dimensions of hope as affirmed in the Bible. I wish I had the time to share all ten of those with you, but I don’t. if you want to, see me later. But let me share two of these dimensions with you.

Brueggemann insists that “God’s promises do not depend on optimistic circumstance but only upon the resolve of God.” Hope does not depend on looking at what is happening around us through rose-colored glasses. One does not have to deny the harsh realities in our world. Like our blessings, you can count them one by one. But it does not mean that one has to live in despair. As Brueggeman insists, “Hope is trust in the promises [of God] against the evidence of circumstances.” You can see examples throughout the Bible. God promises Abraham and Sarah an heir in the face of the elderly, childless couple being well beyond childbearing age; the Jews, enslaved in Babylon, promised a new life back in their homeland. And, of course, the disciples, living in the aftermath of the crucifixion of their lord, promised the hope of new life.

We don’t deny that we live in a brutal, violent, unjust world. But, as Brueggemann declares, “God’s promises do not depend on optimistic circumstances, but on the resolve of God. Hope is trust in the promises against the evidence of circumstances.”

I leave you with a second dimension of hope to which Brueggemann gives voice: “Hope is the ground for courage, freedom, and joy.” If hope possess you, you will be freed from the fear that seems to define so much of the world today. You will live in the assurance of God’s coming reign. In the scripture of the day, when the angel of God announced to Mary that she is pregnant with a child born of the Spirit, she had a lot of reasons to despair, be fearful, and shrink from life. If she were reasonable and pragmatic, she would begin preparing for a life of poverty, ostracism, and marginality. But rather, she was guided by hope, and joy filled her heart: “With all my heart I glorify the Lord. In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.” [Luke 1:46-47]

God offers you and invites you to embrace this hope. In this season of Advent, may this hope come anew into our presence, into our community of faith, possessing and leading us, even in the midst of these challenging times.