

HOPE

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Every year when the start of Advent comes around I am reminded of what a shock Advent was to me the first time I experienced a liturgical year. Now I grew up in a church that didn't celebrate Christmas. That may shock you, but the Christian Science Church does not celebrate Christmas so growing up it was all pretty secular. I mean I heard about the baby Jesus, but that was about it. So I was really excited when this first Advent rolled around at St. Paul's. After the first Sunday I was to say the least confused.

I still remember talking with one of the priests and asking, um I thought we were getting ready for Christmas. He told me, "Well we are, but we are also getting ready for the coming of Jesus into our world. Advent is about waiting for the in-breaking of God into our world, once again. Advent is more than just preparing for the birthday of Jesus" That is why we will read and hear at times these end of the world type readings that so totally confused me in December of 1991.

Advent is a season of preparation, but a preparation for what? Well let us start with what the four candles of the four Sundays mean. We prepare for the coming of Jesus into our lives with these four themes. Hope is today's theme. We follow with Peace, Joy and Love for the rest of the season.

Maybe the best of our readings today in terms of hope is the psalm that we read. Preachers rarely preach on the Psalms. They tend to be something we just read through to get to the Epistle. However psalms are some of the most dramatic writing in the scriptures. First of all we need to consider what a psalm is before we examine the meaning. The psalms are really the hymnal of the Jewish people. The Jews would have sung them not said them.

Psalms all fall into one of three categories, consolation, ones where God is close, things are going well and they praise God. Another is desolation (also called a lament) and that is a where are you God, my life is a mess type of prayer. The last is what we have today which is one of reconciliation. My life is a disaster or I have made mistakes, but you God will lift me up out of the mess and forgive me. That is why today's is a psalm of hope.

It is also important to remember that Psalms have a specific structure. There is an asterisk in each verse that splits the verse into two parts. The second portion either reflects and amplifies the first or is a complete contrast. However that is why most of the time I like to have us read the psalm breaking at the asterisk. Now we don't have this

one in Hebrew but if you did you would see that this is an acrostic using consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet for each verse.

So with that information I would like to read this psalm again but a little more slowly than normal. We tend to race through the psalm and ignore what is there so let's use a practice from the monastery of St. John the Evangelist. After the asterisk and at the end of each verse we will insert a pause to let the line sink into our brains and maybe our hearts.

- 1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
- 3 Show me your ways, O Lord, *
and teach me your paths.
- 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.
- 5 Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.
- 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.
- 7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
- 8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.
- 9 All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

This is a Psalm that acknowledges that God is a great teacher and a plea to help the psalmist learn to live in the ways of the Lord. The psalmist's hope is in seeking to serve the Lord.

There is hope in the everlasting love and compassion of God.

There is hope in the forgiveness of God. We see a back and forth between the psalmist penitence for their sins as well as the assurance that God will pardon, forgive and provide guidance in the future.

Do you realize what a wonderful, hopeful, caring image of God is portrayed in this psalm? Maybe some of you are surprised to see such an image in the Hebrew scripture, but here is just such an image.

Psalms are a wonderful way to pray no matter what frame of mind you are in. Every human emotion is found in the psalms. I have found a translation of the psalms which I use every day that were done by Nan Merrill. The collection is called Psalms for Praying An Invitation to Wholeness.

Here is this psalm reset by Nan you can find it on a half page insert somewhere in your bulletin:

To You, O Love, I lift up my soul!
O Heart within my heart,
 in You I place my trust
 Let me not feel unworthy;
 let not fear rule over me.

Compel me to know your ways, O Love;
 instruct me upon your paths.
Lead me in your truth,
 and teach me,
 For through You will I know
 wholeness;
I shall reflect your Light
 Both day and night.

I know of your mercy, Blessed One,
 And of your unconditional Love;
You have been with me
 From the beginning
Forgive the many times I have walked
 away from You
 Choosing to follow my own will.
I seek your guidance, once again,
 I yearn to know your Peace
Companion me as I open to your Will!

You are gracious and just,
 O Spirit of Truth,
 Happy to guide those who
 miss their way;
I love the company of your faith filled people.
 and count myself among those
 who make your word their own.

Did you hear all the images of God that she used in this prayer? Blessed one, Spirit of Truth, O Love.¹

This morning I want to leave you with not answers, but some questions to ponder this first week of Advent as we contemplate God breaking into our world. So many people today feel an angst, a fear, an unease about our world. How might this image of God, this God of hope impact your world view?

With this image of God in whom we can place our hope and trust, what is it that you are hoping for this Advent? I invite you if you would like to write that hope down on the index card that the ushers gave you and hang it on what will be our Chrismon tree once it is decorated. There are hooks in the bowl on the table in front of the tree. You can do this now as we take a few moments of silence, during the Peace, or during Communion. Let the Spirit speak to you. If something comes later this week, do it then.

So let us just sit for a moment and listen to the Spirit.

¹ Merrill, Nan: Psalms for Praying: An invitation to wholeness (The Continuum International Publishing Group 80 Maiden Lane New York NY10038, 2007)