

Dare We Hope?

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 11:1-2, 6; Romans 5:3-5

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of hope. Anybody out there need a word of hope?

I have lived, for the most part, a charmed life. Born to wonderful parents; that's about 90% of the way to a happy and successful life right there. And apart from an early failed marriage, I have lived a really lucky, lovely life. Not much hardship. Lots of happiness.

But these past 12 months have been hard.

For all of us who care about justice for the poor and protection for the Creation, the current political climate is a daily heartbreak. As one of my friends said the other day, "I'm suffering from 'outrage fatigue.'"

And personally, it's been a challenging year. In February my sister died after a long illness. I miss her much more than I expected I would. And then, the giant event in our family was the sudden death of our beloved brother-in-law in the car crash in Prague. As the shock wears off, the deep sadness settles into our bones and spirit, dampening the brightest of days. It sucks the joy out of Thanksgiving and other family gatherings. In addition, other close family members have given us moments of terror and months of heartache. This time of year, like many of you, I am affected by Seasonal Affective Disorder, a reaction to the lack of sunlight. In October I had somewhat painful and definitely energy-sapping surgery. Then last week my best friend and his wife announced their divorce. Really?

Like I said, I had a lot of lucky years. I was due. Some of you have had a bunch of horrible years like those that I just had, and worse!

Now here we are on the first Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of hope.

Bumper sticker: I feel much better now that I've given up hope.

But, in fact, I do have hope. For a bunch of reasons. But first, let's hear from you. Why do you have hope?

These can be personal things, global things, theological or biblical reasons for hope. Where are you finding hope these days?

(Congregational responses included grandchildren, sunshine, God, the Twins, friends, etc.)

Here's why I have hope, first on the macro scale, and then closer to home.

1. It's hard to believe, but fewer people are dying in war today than at any time in human history. In the 1950s, there were almost 250 deaths caused by war per million people. 250 per million. Now, there are less than 10 per million. Four percent of the rate just two generations ago.
(Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/globally-deaths-war-and-murder-are-decline-180950237/#Gtq5XaD5OOOqXFJz.99>)
2. Rates of extreme poverty. 200 years ago 99% of the people in the world lived in extreme poverty. In 1981 44% of the global population lived in absolute poverty. Today that figure is less than 10%. (Figures from World Bank. *Our World In Data, Global Extreme Poverty* by Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina. First published in 2013; substantive revision March 27, 2017.)
3. Think of the treatment of LGBTQ folks. There is a ways to go, especially in other countries, but just think of how things have changed in the treatment of LGBTQ folks in the US. An astonishing difference from just ten years ago, five years ago.
4. Again a long ways to go, but I am hopeful about the treatment of women. This very recent flood of sexual harassment cases in the news gives me hope; hope that my daughters can grow up in a world that will feel safer than it did a month ago.
5. In the past few years the world has awakened to the human trafficking crisis, with concerted efforts to dismantle and prevent it.
6. Look at the attention that systemic racism is receiving. A long way to go, yes, but the situation today is nothing like when I was a kid.
7. What about protection for the planet? (*Guardian*) If we just look at the US in the past year, it's very discouraging. However, a recent study shows that the US Republican Party stands alone among conservative parties across the world in its denial of human-caused climate change. That's a huge sign of hope. The rest of the world is united in taking action, even conservative political parties. (A paper published in the journal *Politics and Policy* by Sondre Båtstrand at the University of Bergen in Norway compared the climate positions of conservative political parties around the world: the USA, UK, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Germany. He found that the US Republican Party stands alone in its rejection of the need to tackle climate change.)

Closer to home: I have hope because of my adopted grandbabies. Alix Montcho's son, Brayton, (slide) and my grand-nephew, Ian. Ian is Bob's grandson, and he now has no grandfathers remaining. (slide)

I have hope because of the people in this room. I have hope because of you long-time members who have been faithful and steadfast in your walk with Jesus. I have hope because of the young folks at Oak Grove—children, the youth, the young men I'm getting to know better in the Men's Mentor Group. The future's in good hands. I'm so grateful for my position as pastor for so many reasons. One of the chief reasons is my privilege to get to know people of every age.

Speaking of age: In Romans chapter 4 Paul wrote that "Abraham hoped against hope." He and Sarah hoped against hope. That's what you have to do when you and your spouse are both over 90 and God promises that this time next year you'll be changing diapers and starting a college fund. Here's Eugene Peterson's (slide) paraphrase of **Romans 4:18**: **"When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw *he couldn't do, but on what God said (God) would do.*"**

We are in Advent, in which we remember and ritualize the period of waiting and hoping of the Jews. Oh, how they longed for a savior; for generation upon generation they waited.

And then at long last came this Jesus fella, a peasant from the hick town of Nazareth. They felt his compassionate touch, and experienced and witnessed the marvelous, amazing miracles he performed. They saw his tenderness in his encounters with children and women. They heard his harsh rebuke of those in power who treated the powerless with contempt. They saw his bravery in befriending sinners and gentiles and declaring the inclusivity of God's kingdom. Folks got their hopes up, about Jesus. Maybe he was the long-awaited Messiah.

They got their hopes up, sky high! Sky high!...They welcomed him into Jerusalem with a parade befitting a king.

And then their hopes were dashed, dashed by betrayal, by a brutal whipping, by nails...and a spear into his heart.

Famed Southern preacher Fred Craddock describes the scene as folks left Golgotha, the place of crucifixion. "Whaddya gonna do now?" they asked one another.

“I think I’ll go on home.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ll go back to fishin’...What about you? You goin’ home?”

“No, I brought a change of clothes and I’m staying over ‘til the first of the week. Nothin’s impossible with God. Nothin.” Hopin’ against hope.

I believe God gives life to the dead. Do you believe that? (Craddock, from a sermon at Peachtree Presbyterian Church.)

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not put it out.”

Last time I saw my brother-in-law Bob was at a family gathering at his house. It was Easter. Resurrection Day. The next time I see Bob will be on *my* Resurrection Day...

Amen?