

The Advent Path of Active Hope

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

November 27, 2022, First Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Hope

Bringing in the Greens

Isaiah 60:1-2; Romans 13:11-12; Matthew 24:36-39, 42-44, 46

Silent Prayer of Invocation: Mel Goertz has a beautiful Advent haiku in the bulletin and at the end of this document about the light that shines in the darkness. Here is another:

While raking the leaves,
I uncovered two wooly bears
all curled up.

Advent happens in moments of curling up like wooly bears, of reading in front of the fire, of savoring beautiful music and loving connections, of starlit walks and sparkling snow crystals, moments of being fully present to the grace of what is, even when it is not all grace, as we wait and watch for the good we pray is coming, and as we work hard in the world to help it come. I invite you now to enter a warm, cozy place within your imagination and allow yourself to immerse in an Advent moment as you listen to the Prelude...

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday of Advent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and also welcome to those of you online. In ancient days, strangers who came to the door in midwinter were welcomed without question and given a place by the fire. It was a matter of life or death. For that night they were as one family. The church still operates by those rules of hospitality. We may not face the same struggle for survival against the natural elements, but every person who comes through these doors struggles against the elements of illness or loss or fear or sadness or a host of other cold winds in our souls. This church offers sanctuary to all. Please welcome everyone warmly into our family today after the service, both in person and on Zoom, especially those you do not know well and those you know are struggling, so that all may find comfort in the shelter of this loving community.

Advent is a season for waiting, expecting and preparing, for increasing spiritual practices and helping people in need.

Bringing in the Greens: The word Advent means the coming in or approach of something. Advent season anticipates the coming of Christ in three ways: his birth in the stable, his presence in every moment, and the eventual fulfillment of his ideal on earth. What is coming is the light of the world, the hope of new life, and many of Advent's symbols and rituals have to do with bringing light and new life into our lives.

It is no coincidence that this ancient Christian celebration comes at the darkest time of the year, a season observed by other religions long before Christ. Their solstice rituals inspired ours. What we do now—bringing greens inside and lighting candles—unites us in a shared common humanity with people across the ages...

Early Romans revered holly as a symbol of courage, strength and everlasting life. Early Christians revered it as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. A legend says that holly sprang up under the footsteps of Jesus, and so it was called the Holy Tree, which became the holly.

A Mexican legend tells of a homeless girl who had no gift to lay beside the church manger on Christmas Eve. She was sitting on the church steps crying when an angel told her that any roadside weed would do as a gift because Jesus could feel her love. She brought a dusty stalk of burdock into the sanctuary and it was miraculously transformed into a radiant red poinsettia, known in Mexico ever after as the Christmas flower...

Advent Candle Lighting I

Today we begin Advent with hope. Hope is about things to come, but also in a way it is about the past. One reason we hope Christmas will be magical this year is that it has felt magical in the past. We hope that the light will shine in the darkness within and around us because we have felt the light shining in the darkness before. We hope the Spirit of Jesus will be born in our heart this year because it has been born there in the past.

We know God's grace has helped us in the past, but sometimes we forget and feel hopeless, and need to remind ourselves to look for it again, and to trust. So today at this candle we remind ourselves of reasons to hope.

We find promises of God's life-transforming light repeated throughout scripture. The Prophet Isaiah put it this way: "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you."

We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of the light of God into the world. With the advent of this light comes hope. Today let us hope that by welcoming the Spirit of Christ into our lives we will become like candles ourselves, full of its light, helping to bring peace, joy and love to others.

We do this praying that the Holy Spirit will help us wait patiently and be ready to welcome Christ when he comes. He may come to us through words or music, through candles or greens, through the need or the love of another person, through the giving or receiving of a gift, or just through a warm feeling deep in our heart. Let us hope and pray that we will be open to Christ whenever and however he comes to us. Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

The Advent Path of Active Hope

Early Christians envisioned a coming age on earth when Christ's work would be fulfilled, when the realm of God would become the dominant culture of human civilization—meaning the way of love, compassion, justice and peace that Jesus taught. Jesus called it the coming of the Son of Man, which we can think of as the coming of a humanity fully evolved, finally as wise and virtuous as the Spirit of the universe created us to be.

Today we heard two prophecies about that time. The prophet Isaiah said, "For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you."

Darkness here represents hard times on earth when people have become lost, creating suffering and despair. We can count on there being darkness to pass through, and we can count on the light of God rising to guide and empower us to establish a beautiful and sacred way for humanity to live.

The second prophecy is much more difficult. Jesus has been lamenting how lost the people have become, how astray their leaders have led them, and how much he longs to take them under his wings and comfort and teach them, but they will not listen. He has spoken of a great suffering that will come as a result.

What matters to Jesus is that we keep awake, working to establish God's realm on earth here and now, whatever the conditions around us.

The book *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone talks about two kinds of hope. The first is hopefulness, a conditional optimism that fades away in the face of impossible odds.

The second kind of hope is a desire for an outcome we long to see happen, a desire so strong that we become "participants in bringing about what we hope for." This is exactly what Jesus is telling us to do. He is calling us with the strongest rhetorical urgency to take an Advent path of active hope through the darkness toward the light.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone write, "Active Hope is a practice...we can apply to any situation [personal or global], and it involves three key steps. First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction. Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express...."

This is the kind of hope Bill Coffin called us to have. He said, "Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart's full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing."

Macy and Johnstone write, "Since we each...bring with us our own particular portfolio of interests, skills and experiences, we are touched by different concerns and called to respond in different ways. The contribution each of us makes to the healing of our world is our gift of Active Hope."

Hope in the light becomes itself the lighted way we follow to transform ourselves and transform the world. We act because we hope, and we bring what we hope for into being. The composer Tchaikovsky said, "I sit down to the piano regularly at nine-o'clock in the morning and the Muses have learned to be on time for that rendezvous." He sat down in hope, and that hope opened him to the inspiration that showed the way forward note by note.

Jesus knew that it makes all the difference what story we tell ourselves about our own lives or about the world. Today's Gospel passage sounds scary, but the story Jesus was trying to

recruit us to work with was one of tremendous hope. Macy and Johnstone identify three main stories we tell ourselves, as Jesus knew.

One is Business As Usual. This story says human civilization is on the right path, and if we keep going as we are, living as we are, everything will work out just fine. Business As Usual is the story that Jesus says people were living before Noah and the flood.

The second story is called “The Great Unraveling.” This is the story that Jesus prophesied would come from business as usual and that science is telling us is happening now to our earth, including a host of social problems that are worsening as the environmental crisis deepens. It’s a horror story that can lead to paralyzing despair.

Macy and Johnstone write, “The third story is held...by those who know the first story is leading us to catastrophe and who refuse to let the second story have the last word.” The third story involves “the emergence of new and creative human responses” that are “bringing about a...life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world. We call this story the Great Turning. The central plot is [each of us] finding and offering our gift of Active Hope.”

The Great Turning is what Jesus would call the coming of the Son of Man or the realm of God on earth. It is the light Isaiah prophesied would rise through the darkness.

Jesus asks us to choose the story of the Great Turning and give it our all. He said, “Blessed is the servant who is hard at work when the master arrives.” The Advent path of Active Hope is designed to free us from whatever keeps us stuck and lost in the darkness.

Our hope rests in the Spirit working through every one of us to fulfill the hope our spiritual tradition holds out to us. Hope in that hope, yearn for it, live for it, die still working for it. Hope in the light rising in us and Christ being born anew in us, transforming us so that we may go forth to transform the world.

Let us pray in silence, inviting the Spirit to show us how to use our gifts to fulfill its hope...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Advent, the time when birds
come back to your feeder
bringing light with them.