

Sermon: November 29, 2020 – Luke 3: 1-6
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Hope. What an important word for us right now.

We need hope. With widespread fatigue and discouragement as public health needs necessitate greater restrictions, and the kinds of emotional and spiritual hopelessness that many people are experiencing, we need things that help us find hope: short term hope, close-to-home hope, as well as bigger, more far-reaching hopes for the world. So long as it brings no harm to self or others, this is a time when we need to be thankful whenever and wherever hope presents itself.

Hope is, at its core a very forward-looking word. What I want to do this morning, though, is to seek hope by looking back. In today's scripture reading, John the Baptizer makes his annual Advent appearance, calling people to a baptism of repentance and re-orientation. And as he prepares people to change, he begins this forward-looking process by looking back, repeating the words of the Prophet Isaiah, written some six centuries earlier.

I asked my friend Ruben Nelson for some help here, in understanding the way that Jewish thinkers like John and Isaiah viewed the relationship of past, present and future. Combining his helpful re-framing with some wonderings I was already having, I end up with this: while I live in a culture that tends to see time in a linear way, with a straight line moving from back there in the past, through the present, and ahead to the future, there was a sense in Ancient Hebrew thought that both past and future are in one's midst when deciding how to act in the present. Things that happened in the past were not regarded as "done and gone" and no longer relevant; no, things that happened in past still reached into and impacted the present day. And when making decisions about what to do right now, John and Isaiah and, yes, Jesus, knew that the decisions they were making now could never be separated from their future implications and consequences.

When John the Baptist shows up, then, he re-speaks the historic words of Isaiah, describing God's desire to deliver people from the oppressive powers that were messing up their lives. Isaiah, speaking to people in exile whose exile was not likely going to last much longer, states God's desire to ease their return home, straightening the dangerous roads and flattening the exhausting hill climbs. Isaiah speaks a word of hope to people who could finally return to a place they had yearned for, for a long time. And John, encouraging people to declare by their lives what kind of future they wanted to have, reaches back to Isaiah to remind the people that they had done this before. The people of Judah had overcome great obstacles and decades of exile, in order to return home, and that resilience and strength and that level of trust in God could inform and energize them once more, six centuries later, as they continued to seek a place where the winding roads often walked by the poor and traumatized got straightened out, and as the hills and valleys that usually favoured the rich and powerful got flattened. John reminds the people of the great promises of God which link past and future with present. God was in past their hope, their guide and their refuge and this already had future and present implications. In order to have hope for the future, they needed

reminding of God's intent in the past, intent that was still alive in their present circumstances.

I bring this forward at this time, in the season of Advent 2020, on the "Sunday of Hope", to remind us that these spiritual ancestors can inform and shape and energize the hope we seek going forward. That vision from Isaiah, now some 2600 years old, is still how God sees things: even now, we find God's sacred energy in those places where we partner with God to build justice. Hope comes when people and governments and societies and popular movements strive toward equity, fairness, a future freed from racism, sexism, classism, ableism. We commit ourselves to God's own gift of hope when we seek actions that uplift the greatest common good (and yes, that includes wearing face masks and keeping distance and not going into public places more than we absolutely need to and staying home when sick). As we hear John from 2000 years ago quoting Isaiah from 2600 years ago, we acknowledge that Isaiah's word of hope and John's call to repentance cannot be relegated to the world of "way back then, way over there." As Malcolm Guite said in his Holy Week presentations in Norwich, the words and actions from their then have implications for our now. The same God who held the world in love way back then, has never ceased and will never cease calling us to that same path of love and justice.

In addition to this Biblical history, I want to lift up what you may have learned, from the story of your own family, or the stories of Indigenous and settler history here in the Bow Valley, or for those of you in recovery/support groups, perhaps the stories of those a bit further down the path to wholeness than you are right now: that is, their stories of hardship and resilience and the transformative power of community. All manner of people over the centuries have gutted it out in conditions we can scarcely imagine, and their ability to do so brings strength to all who struggle now. Not in a, "they survived a lot worse than you did" competitive or shaming sort of way, but as an acknowledgement that the power of the human spirit does linger long after the lives of those who exhibited such gifts. In the same way that the Jewish people have always understood their back-story informing and participating in the next chapter of their story, the lessons learned from our forebears and their recovery from loss, tragedy, war, mental anguish, illness and injury, perhaps even how they overcame previous pandemics, can speak a word of hope that we would do well to hear.

And I encourage each person to think back only eight months, to the most recent time when a public health emergency was declared in the Province of Alberta. What positive ways of being did you develop then, that could help you again? Were there things that you kind of fumbled then, that you would like to have done differently then and can do differently now? Who are the people you wish you'd reached out to? Who were the people who were positive game-changers for you in those days? I can't say that I'm happy to have the chance to do it all over again, but I hope that I was alert enough then to have those experiences help shape what comes next. (HINT: I wish I had put a lot more time into spiritual practice then, rather than fretting so much over what to do now and what to do next...and yes, that is a challenge to myself, for how I will conduct these days). Even when the history is recent, it is not disposable or dispensable, or to be survived-then-forgotten; it reaches forward to participate in what happens next.

Hope, to me, is the reasonable expectation that the God who holds all of creation in love, and has done so since the beginning of time, is still doing so now and has no intention of letting go in future. As I look at God's history of hope, and Christ's promise of resurrection hope, I see hope not as a commodity bestowed upon the fortunate, but rather, a global yearning that God wants us to embrace, that all lives will have safety and creativity and purpose, that the earth and all who dwell therein be healthy, that hopelessness will be no more.

Held by the past and the future, unfolding in each present moment, may you find that hope, may hope find you, may hope bring light to this very moment and the next one and the next one. In the name of the eternal God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, may this be so. Amen.

References:

Guite, Malcolm. Holy Week talks, unpublished, Norwich Cathedral 2019. See also <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/>

Nelson, Ruben. See <http://foresightcanada.com/>

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