

Meditation on Songs of Hope
Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-9; 35:1-10; 40:1-11
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The Third Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

It is a tradition in many churches to offer a Service of Lessons and Carols during Advent or Christmas. It is not just that it is a great chance to sing our favorite carols, though it is that! It is also a chance to listen to the songs of hope from Scripture that have propelled the faith of believers for generations. This Advent, we have been focusing on Mary's song, the *Magnificat*. Yet Mary's song is built on a tradition of prophets who sang with confident hope in God's providence and grace over the centuries.

My friend Bob Dunham, pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has written a marvelous Advent devotional. One of my favorite entries is his reflection on hope. He writes,

“Hope is such a powerful force in the lives of individuals and communities, for it keeps them looking forward. There is nothing so moving and reassuring as a community forged by a common hope, and there is nothing quite so bleak as a person or community in which hope has been lost.

“Christian hope is not naïve. It shares, understands, and partakes in the world's sufferings, pains and defeats, but perseveres on account of a great ‘nevertheless.’ It combines what biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to as ‘utter realism and extravagant hope.’”

These days, hope may be hard to come by. But that is precisely when we need hope the most. And we're reminded that hope is never self-generated, but comes to us as a gift – a treasure from the providence of God.

Czech playwright and later president Vaclav Havel – though he himself was an atheist – once spoke of hope this way. Long before the Velvet Revolution, when the future of his beloved country was far from certain, he said these words:

“Hope is ... not the same as joy that things are going well, or a willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’ It is ... this hope, above all, which gives us strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do.”

“Such is the hope of Advent,” Bob Dunham reminds us. “Such is the hope of Advent, the hope that propels us onward in our journey, but our ‘eslewhere’ has a particular name, Jesus, and a particular human face, seen first at Bethlehem.”