

“Hope for Freedom”
Zechariah 9:9-13, 16
Luke 1:26-33
December 16, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
The 3rd Sunday in Advent

We’ve been talking about hope a lot lately. It happens every Advent, of course; this is the season of hope and anticipation.

Last week I mentioned two different kinds of hope: reasonable hope that has good odds for fulfillment, and unreasonable hope – the kind of hope that there’s really no good reason to harbor. The first kind says “we hope water will come out of the faucet.” The second kind says “we hope there would be peace in the Middle East this year.” Our ancestors’ ancient hope for the Messiah emerged from the ashes of this second kind of hope: when absurd dreams of restoration blossomed into a heartfelt, genuine expectation that God’s Messiah will come.

The biblical prophets record these Messianic hopes, hopes that grew more and more fervent as their bleak history unfolded:

From 1000 BC, at the height of King David’s empire.

To around 500 BC, when they’d been weakened by Civil War, the north overrun by Assyria and the south exiled by Babylon.

To the time of Christ, when they’d existed as a vassal state for five hundred years, occupied in succession by Persia, Greece, and Rome.

And their hope? Instead of wilting, it thrived under those harsh conditions. The hope of the Messiah grew from one who would purify our unrighteousness ... to one who would restore David’s throne ... to one who would set right God’s entire creation.

So they waited. And they waited. And they waited. The time between the last of the Old Testament prophets ... like Malachi, or this part of Zechariah ... the time between the last of the Old Testament prophets and the opening of the New Testament is filled with the intrigue of hopes deferred.

You remember (if only vaguely) your ancient history: Alexander the Great – trained by Aristotle -- conquered the Persian empire – in part by using the marvelous road system the Persians built – and left a wake of Greek language and culture behind him. After Alexander’s death, his “field marshals” -- the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria -- warred over the conquered territories.

You might remember the name Antiochus Epiphanes: he was the Seleucid emperor who prohibited Jewish practice, ordering them to worship Zeus – and placing a pagan altar in the Jerusalem temple. Many righteous Jews were martyred; but others rose up in an armed rebellion led by Judas Maccabeus (later immortalized by George Frederic

Handel). Remarkably, and for the first time in centuries, Israel regained its independence.

And you might remember that her independence was quite short-lived ... for as the Seleucids fell, the Roman Empire rose. Judas Maccabaeus's great-grandsons were drawn into the proxy war between Julius Caesar and Pompey. When Julius Caesar won, he rewarded his proxy's family with Roman citizenship and political appointments. One of them became king over Judea. His name, of course, was Herod. ("In What Ways Does a Knowledge of Intertestamental History and Literature Shed Light on the New Testament Gospels, which a Knowledge of the Old Testament Books Alone Could Not?" © Spotlight Ministries, Vincent McCann, 1998, www.spotlightministries.org.uk)

And the Messiah they kept waiting for? Whatever happened to their hope of the Messiah? The same things that always happen when hope is deferred: they began to take hope into their own hands.

Some, like the Zealots, led insurgencies against the Empire; any number of armed revolutionaries claimed to be the "messiah."

Some, like the Essenes, withdrew from the system, creating a utopian community in the desert to await the Messianic prophet and his apocalypse.

Some of them, like King Herod, joined the system, becoming keen supporters of the Roman Empire, claiming it was God who was behind the "peace of Rome."

But here's the thing: hope is never in our hands alone, and our deepest hopes are rarely fulfilled with the answers we are looking for. Hope is always in God's hands ... and God often has different ideas.

The prophets waited for five hundred years for the Messiah to come. And when he came, he was not the one that anyone expected. Those who hoped for an armed revolutionary to throw off their foreign occupiers instead got a gentle teacher who welcomed Greeks and Samaritans as his followers. Those who hoped for a Messiah to come in a whirlwind and end the world instead got a prophet who preached peace to the nations. Those who hoped for a king to share the power of the Empire instead got a peasant who got himself crucified. They all hoped for a white knight riding in on his horse to rescue them ... and instead they got a man, a man riding in on a donkey to save the whole world. None of them ... none of them got what they hoped for. Instead, we got the Messiah we needed.

I've come to believe that our deepest hopes are never within our control, or we would have made them happen long ago. And I've come to believe that our deepest hopes are never satisfied in ways we would construct, or we would have manufactured them along the way. In fact, the more profound our hopes, the less we can control their outcome ... and the more we must rely on the answers God alone will give. Even atheist Czech playwright and President Vaclav Havel said: "The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. ... [And] the deepest

and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere’” (Disturbing the Peace (NY: Knopf, 1990), pp. 181-2). It is from elsewhere – from the throne of grace – that real hope comes.

Recently in Faith Connections, our newsletter, I shared with you a letter I’ve saved from a Methodist colleague, Mark Dove, in Columbus Ohio. Over twenty years ago, around this time of year, Mark and his wife lost their young, beloved daughter; and after her death, he wrote this letter to his congregation:

“Never, in all my ministry, have I so clearly understood the ‘hope for a Messiah’ that was the Jewish longing some 2000 years ago, and is the universal hope of all human beings at some point in their journey through life. Never before have I had such a need for some event to happen which would re-instate the glory of the past. For the ancient Jew it was a longing for a return to national pride and status. In my personal journey, it is the longing to return to the family that I knew just a few months ago. ... The Christ that came was not the one the Jew longed for, nor will it be the one I am most desirous to entertain. But, the glory of the Christmas season is that the Christ that does come is precisely the one we truly need – the one who enables us to live fully the life that is given us, and live it in humility, gratitude, and compassion. Thank God for the Christ which God gives us all” (Epworth United Methodist Church, Columbus, Ohio, December 1984).

I cannot know what hopes you are harboring in your heart ... what longings you ache for ... what dreams you cling to, for yourself, or for our world. I don’t know if you hope for peace in your family ... or health for our planet ... or a holy stillness in your restless soul. What I do know is this: God comes to us still: destroying evil with the power of love, combating violence with the promise of peace, reigning as king of kings, cloaked in humility and grace. God comes to us still, in ways we cannot imagine. And this is the hope we are invited to enter into in this holy season.

My late and beloved teacher Henri Nouwen once said it this way: in a world preoccupied with control,

“To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. ... The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, ... trusting that new things will happen ... new things that are far beyond our own imagination ...” (in Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), p. 34; reprinted with permission from “A Spirituality of Waiting,” The Weavings Reader, ed. by John Mogabgab, Upper Room Books, 1993).

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!” the prophet writes; “Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.” Amen.