

Advent 2
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

December 4, 2016
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Hope of a Different Sort

Hope is an action.

Many years ago I was hitchhiking through Ecuador. I was picked up by a wizened old man who offered me lunch at his hacienda, if I would listen to his pitch. He told me that his last name was Bustamante, a VERY big name in Ecuadorian blue-blood circles. He and his brother, bitter at the land-reforms of the 1960's had hung onto a meager piece of what was once a grand and extensive holding of prime farmland. They were both well advanced in years, single by that time, and, as I came to see, living in the ashes of days of glory long gone.

He had purchased a 200 hectare farm on the other side of the mountains and he was looking for someone of "Nordic blood" to run the place and to "keep those damn Indians in line!" Even as he drove me into his derelict place he shouted insults at the Indians we passed, and proclaimed their music to be noise, noise and nothing but noise. He wanted me to push them down, "keep them in their place," and keep them from becoming too uppity.

I ate his food and visited politely and asked him to return me to the main road once again. I was not his man. I was raised with the Indians, their presence was a joy, and their music was not noise to me. My parents had spent a lifetime trying to bring hope to the Indians. That mindset was ingrained in me, of the very fibers of my being. I, on the other hand, could not intentionally set out to strip a people of hope.

This contrasts so violently with the delightful little interchange I had on the phone with our grandson a month before they were to come for Thanksgiving. After the usual, "Hi, How are you?" and "We love you," and the discussions of the upcoming visit, we heard him say insistently to his mother, "We have to be READY!"

Hope as merely a sentiment is nice, but hope in the biblical sense is only complete when it results in action that prepares for that for which one hopes. Take today's lessons, for example. At a time when Israel was in disarray, feeling betrayed by the exile, knowing the world to be out-of-sorts and not really believing they could fix it, into the middle of this hopeless situation the oracle of Isaiah comes. Behold I am coming, and I will do a new thing. The status quo is not the final picture of things. I am coming up upset the apple-cart for the sake of my people. Get ready for something new. Be hopeful, yes, AND be ready to act on that hope.

When Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans the Christian community was in flux. Paul himself was a devout Jew, as were Peter and the other apostles, yet it seemed clear that the message of Jesus was meant for a much wider audience. Already Gentiles had been incorporated into the Church marking this group of adherents as different from

mainstream Judaism of the day, even heretical in many peoples' minds. In fact, the Gentiles outnumbered the Jews in some churches, leaving an elephant in the living room. The Jewish people who were often family members with Christian Jews but who rejected Jesus as the Messiah were being left behind by this new and quickly growing Jesus movement. What was God's plan for God's chosen people vis-a-vis the growing Gentile church?

Paul steps in with an answer, a Biblical answer. If you look at the prophecies of the Old Testament (which were the only Scriptures available to the church at this stage of the game,) you will see a trend. The salvation of Israel is not intended to be insular, something restricted to the Jewish people. The grace of God has always been intended to extend across the face of humankind. Jew and Gentile are being called into relationship with God, and now we see that this is through Christ, who is the hope of both Jew and Gentile. Paul urges them not to be divisive. The hope of the Jew is also the hope of the Gentile. No need to push one group out in favor of the other--either way! We can act in a new way, an inclusive way that gathers both Jew and Gentile into one family in Christ.

Finally, the Gospel lesson tells us the story of the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. He comes onto the scene spouting words from Isaiah, even if a bit edited for his new message. Instead of, "A voice calls, in the wilderness prepare a way," he edits the punctuation to make it, "A voice calls in the wilderness, prepare a way." He is in the wilderness and he is calling people to listen to him, and he is putting the onus not on the external location but the inner one. In the wilderness of your hopelessness act. Do something. Prepare. Get ready for what God is about to do.

How do we prepare a way in our wilderness?

The wilderness is all the ways in which we as a people and as a society live in conflict with God's perfect law of love.

A sheriff of a county in a state which shall all remain unnamed was convicted of drug running after a shoot-out at his palatial country home that killed one person. He got 7 years, was out in 2 and got himself re-elected.

Michael Rockefeller, great-grandson of John D. Rockefeller got himself eaten by the Asmat in what is now Irian Jaya in 1961. The New York Post followed up on it in 2014, 53 years later. Do you think that if his last name had not been Rockefeller anyone would have paid attention after so many years?

Mr. Carlos Slim Helu of Mexico City was the richest man on record in 2010, the year after the crash of 2009. His net worth jumped from \$35B to over \$53B, jumping to #1, ahead of Bill Gates, in a year when so many people faced lay-offs and evaporating savings.

We live in a wilderness consumed by power, privilege and plenty.

John, on the other hand, shows us a radically different way.

Soldiers came to him. Roman soldiers were men of power. They could legally force people to carry loads for them for one mile. They were often outside the law, and they were known for their brutal ways. Extortion, false accusation for a kick back, these kinds of abuses of power were common. To them John says, "Don't extort or falsely accuse, and be content with your wages." Remember that there are people on the other side of power, people who suffer the consequences when power is abused. John makes a path through the wilderness of power.

Tax collectors came to him. Tax collectors had it easy. They charged what they could get, took their paycheck from Rome, paid what Rome required of the tax revenue, and pocketed the difference. It's the classic case of legal extortion. To them John says, "Don't collect more than you are supposed to." Remember that there are people on the other side of taxes, there are people on the other side of extortion. John makes a path through the wilderness of plenty.

Baptism in the day was a way for non-Jews to become Jewish. It was the rite of initiation for Gentiles. John comes requiring it of good, upstanding Jews. He harks back to the prophets who called for a radical return to the piety of ancient Israel, where humility and equality were celebrated in worship. However, in the day it could very easily have been scandalous. "What, me? I'm a son of Abraham!" And John says, "From these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham!" Remember that there are people on the other side of privilege, people who often pay the cost of those in the limelight; people who are often forgotten, unseen and un-thanked. He makes a path through the wilderness of privilege.

The way through the wilderness, the way that opens for us the path by which God will come among us is the way of radical self-giving love, the way of Jesus. This way is our only hope. Hope in action is action for others, action that recognizes the divine right to exist, and the duty of society to grant to all a chance at a healthy, wholesome life of dignity. To do this we must first notice people. Who is unseen? Who is not noticed? Who is not thanked? Who pays the cost of our excesses? Where are the forgotten? When in love we reach out to these least of all we love as we have been loved, and we prepare a way for the coming of the Christ.