

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Hopify"
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Advent I

Every season starts with hope. Every relationship starts with hope. Then something happens to either curb it or make it go away. So what will we do to have an extra injection of hope, not a vaccination against it, but a booster shot that will "hopify" us? Yes, that's an invented word which means to intensify hope in us.

The Scriptures we have read lead us to some of the ways we may find hope. From Jeremiah, we are led again to the Messiah, the Christ who comes to fulfill all human longings for justice and what is right. And to be sure this is the first place we go for, to Jesus. Jesus is not only the right answer for almost every good children's story, he is the centre of the Advent wreath and the one to whom all questions point.

From David in Psalm 25, we are pointed again to God, for trust, truth, teaching and to be able to get these three "tees," the courage to be humble. From Paul in 1 Thessalonians, we find hope in relationships, where we can give and receive love. His desire for them to grow in their relationship with God shines as he longs for them to be blameless and holy, more and more like Jesus. There is no question that when we cannot find hope within ourselves, we must go to others to get it. We cannot muster it ourselves or conjure it within us. Finally, Dr. Luke tells us about the end times, and how our hope ultimately needs to be in the second coming of Christ, who will make everything new, and finally bring justice to the injustices we so frequently experience and hear about. Luke warns us that we will not find any solace in drinking too much or shopping too much. Hope is found in the person who is coming.

The question remains what kind of work does the Lord bring us to when we find ourselves in despair, in a cycle of lows, or in an all out depression. We need to seek out others to give us the hope that we lack. Sometimes we need to seek out professionals. But others, no matter who they are, can only help us as we share with them what is driving us to despair. Here again we find the call to grieve. Grieving is the painful process that heals pain. It is the process that brings hope back. It is rarely easy, and only happens in a fruitful way on a conscious level.

We grieve what we have lost. But what is it we have lost? The answer to this is as deep as a casual request to completely review all the most important elements of your life. Many of us lost our childhoods at a young age. Many have lost much in relationships, starting with mother or father, siblings and other family members. As we grieve the family relationships we might have had, and consider some of the chaos we faced as children, we come again to a substantial list of losses.

When we look to other relationships, whether casual or serious, we find other losses. When we look to professional hopes, we find other losses. When we look at ambitions, not of the material, but of the soul, we find other losses.

When we look within, and wonder what kind of a friend we have been, or whether our friends truly are the friends we had hoped them to be, then we begin another list. When we look at those we have disappointed, those we have hurt, those we have never even considered, we find a pool of losses.

One author's list goes like this:

- death of a loved one
- death of a dream
- death of a season of life (caring actively for children, employment and so on)
- death of a relationship
- death of a plan
- failure
- not attaining the love or approval of a significant person
- not being the person one wishes he or she were (loss of the ideal self)
- not getting what we want
- loss of health due to illness
- financial reversals
- death of anything we need, want, or desire, good or bad

So if you're not yet thoroughly depressed, just listening to the lists, you probably want to protest. This is the first part of reacting to loss, denying that it could be this bad. Unfortunately, there is more unreality in the denial than in the opening up to the possibility of a profound set of losses.

Then we can begin to bargain with the loss and say things like if I were to perform more, or be more attractive or thinner, then I would get the love I need. Then we often move to despair as we realize that what life is like is the way it is. The losses are real and the tears come. The anger comes.

Dr. Cloud in his book When People Grow notes that we need two things for healthy grieving. We need love, support and comfort. Grief is supposed to be done in community. That's why the Bible says "Weep with those who weep;" and "Mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). If we don't find others to share with, in the midst of our pain, we will stay stuck in the despair or wishing. He says we keep even our rotten food to eat in the midst of a famine.

The second thing we need is structure. We need time and space for grieving. Support groups meet regularly and do regular tasks to help one another. They often have a theme, and they have a few people in them who listen well and give tons of grace.

I wish I could tell you that hope comes as easily as your next meal. But really, what we need we can only find through other people, which is the main plan God has for us. People helping people. So if we can help here, let us. Talk to me or one of the elders.

So why such a depressing sermon on hope? Because one of the things we think we could do is simply to get hope by some sort of acquisition, just like we get a Christmas gift or go to the mall for something for someone else. But it isn't true.

Joan Bauer, in her novel Hope Was Here, tells the story of a young waitress named Hope who was just about to quit her job, because the owner just ran off with all the business' money. She writes:

"I touched the boarded-up window (of the restaurant). I'd invented a sandwich here when I was fifteen—the Keep Hoping. It had layers of smoked turkey, sun-dried tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, and chopped salad greens with red wine vinaigrette on a sour dough roll. People ordered it like mad, too, because hope is something everyone needs. It was a sandwich for our time." (p. 3)

Wouldn't it be great if we could order a sandwich that would inject us with a good dose of hope? Well, there is the choir soup lunch coming soon...you never know.

But seriously, finding greater levels of hope usually means confronting the reality we carry around inside of us. Ho...ho...hope is an invaluable resource. It is good not only to talk to the Lord about it, but also to those who care about you.

The Advent season is about the Lord coming. Let's look forward to His coming more deeply into each one of us.

Let us pray.