

“Hope” Coming to...Discouragement

I. Advanced organizer

A. **Jason and I just celebrated our anniversary on Friday: 16 years.**

1. reflecting on that decision 16 years ago to take the plunge.
 - a) **we were super young: I was 24, he was 20.** (Our kids are closer to those ages at this point than we are.) The pictures of what we wanted to do with our lives were still very early on. Jason’s big life goal at the time was to get an undergraduate degree of some sort. Mine was to get a record contract.
 - b) **We went through premarital counseling.** Talked about how different our families of origin were. How we’d handle our finances. Theoretical number of kids, settling on somewhere between two and four.
 - c) **But there was much uncertainty.** How could we know we’d still like each other years down the line? What if our feelings changed? What if we grew apart? What if we couldn’t live into our dreams together? Was it wrong to marry so young?
 - d) **Mentor assured me that marriage, like any big decision was uncertain.** That we’d never have 100% certainty. But that we make choices based on the best information we have. And a sense of faith-filled expectation in what we feel should be, must be if what we understand about the world is right and good is true. **We make choices in Hope.**

B. **Beginning a new series as we begin the season of Advent**

1. **“advent” means “coming”.** Latin term that marks the sense of expectation behind the season as Christmas approaches
2. There are traditional themes that are often reflected on, with the help of elements like wreaths and candles.
3. But how do the traditions actually connect with the nitty gritty of real life we’re living in?
4. **“Coming Into...what exactly?”**
5. This season Advent is shorter than normal. Because Christmas Eve is a Sunday it functions as the fourth Sunday of Advent and also Christmas Eve. We will end the season that morning with a joint service with friends at Oak Life church in Oakland
6. **For the next three weeks, we’re going to be considering traditional themes that are reflected on in these three early weeks of Advent. I think each of these themes is meant to be a gift that is brought as God comes through the intimacy of human embodiment in Jesus.** As we think of these gifts this season, I want to consider the implications of each of them actually coming into the realities of what it means to be human in this time and place. In the US, in the Bay Area, in late 2017.
7. **The first Sunday of Advent for many around the world, is the Sunday to reflect on the gift of Hope.** Now, I don’t know about you, but to me, **“Hope” can feel more like a hallmark sentiment or the stuff of animated Christmas Specials** than a source of practical help or spiritual power. It can feel like naive optimism or wishful thinking, or some psychological self-soothing. **Especially in a time like today; I think a lot of us feel more discouraged than hopeful.** To talk about hope can feel like being detached from reality.
8. But **psychologists don’t actually see it that way.** For them “hope” is an incredibly important component in our growth and well-being, particularly in coming through times of stress and suffering. So what do they understand about hope that I might be missing?

- a) C.R. Snyder is a psychological theorist who specializes in psychology of hope. He says, ***“Hope is the sum of perceived capabilities to produce routes to desired goals, along with the perceived motivation to use those routes.”***

(1) Hope is believing there is a way forward to get to a place we want to be. There is a path that we can walk, a journey we can pursue. Hope doesn't necessarily know what the journeying will be like, what will come along the way, but it provides the motivation to embark. To look ahead. To go somewhere, even when things seem bleak. (Beat.)

C. I'd like to engage in an imagination exercise. I want you to imagine what it would feel like to live in a time and place like this:

1. The place and time you live in is **characterized by extreme inequality of wealth and power**. The bulk of money and political power are concentrated amongst a small group of corrupt leaders. These leaders have used **legislation, taxation, manipulation of the system to benefit their class at the top, increasingly leaving out those who do not have those levers of power to use**. This consolidation of power has forced folks into debt, made it impossible for them to own their own homes or pieces of land, driven them out of their communities, and into exploitive labor practices which provide increasingly little for them to live on or feed their children with, while the rich work little and party a lot. Furthermore, **the rich and powerful have the religious elites in their pocket, giving them a sense of spiritual cover**, perhaps even blessing, as they exclude and oppress those less fortunate than they.
2. For many of us, **this scenario may feel all too familiar**. We don't have to imagine very hard. We are living in a moment that probably feels to many of us like what I've just described is playing out in real time.
3. **But the time I'm describing isn't today**. The period I'm thinking of took place a long time ago, **actually nearly 3000 years ago**. I was describing the world that the prophet Isaiah inhabited, **the nation of Judah in 8th century BC**.

- a) **Isaiah was the major prophet, the major person communicating the words of Yahweh to this part of Yahweh's designated people**. Judah was a religious entity, a group of people gathered by a common spirituality and connection to a living God, Yahweh, as well as a geo-political one. They were a nation state with a monarchy. Their national history included civil war, that resulted in a divided Kingdom. **And since the division, their kingdom had become progressively more marked by issues of structural inequality that favored the religious and political, wealthy elites, and actively oppressed those who were not part of the ruling class**. This is the world the Prophet found himself in. And for him and his contemporaries it was a real question, what was the path forward? Was increased idolatry, secularization, and exploitation the only trajectory? Or could there be another path for those who believed that Yahweh was writing their story? **Was there a source of Hope?**

II. Isaiah begins his book laying out the predicament he and his contemporaries see.

A. Isaiah 1:21-23

1. ***“How tragic that the once-faithful city has become a prostitute!
She was once a center of justice, fairness resided in her, but now only murderers.
22 Your silver has become scum, your beer is diluted with water.
23 Your officials are rebels, they associate with thieves. All of them love bribery, and***

look for payoffs.

They do not take up the cause of the orphan, or defend the rights of the widow.”

2. the prophet's predicament - feeling the tension between Israel's potential and calling, and it's reality. Having the capacity to see the gap and grieve it. Perhaps we can relate.
 - a) **If you have found 2017 to be a stressful year, you're not alone. In August of this year the American Psychological Association (or APA) conducted it's annual survey on stress in America** to investigate American's relationship with it. Now Americans are usually stressed about a number of things: work, money. But this year, **another significant source of stress has emerged for the majority of Americans: the state of our nation. Nearly 60% of Americans surveyed said that they consider this current moment to the “the lowest point in our nation's history that they can remember.”** Now this is a finding that holds as a majority across political parties, and across generations. The majority of **Republicans, Democrats and Independents** all believe this moment is the worst they can remember in our history. Those who lived through the **rise of fascism and World War II say this is worse. Those who lived through Vietnam, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, Watergate, believe this is worse.** Those who lived through 9/11, and the rise of mass shooting, feel this is the worst.
 - b) In a sense all of these people are experiencing stress, for some significant stress, **because of a gap between how things are and how things have been or could be or should be.**
 - c) **As a parent, I feel daily the tension of what I want to teach our kids** it means to be good, descent human being; what it means to live in a democracy, as a white family what it means to value the voices and leadership of people of color, teaching my son to value and respect women, for my young daughters to value their own contributions in the world: and all of that feels like it's under attack, etc.
3. and **this is what makes what comes next in Isaiah remarkable.** The words of the prophet describe the painful reality that is. And it's bleak. But **they also describe something beyond this picture that the prophet understands as equally real.** This is where the prophet is Inspired. It's as if something in his very bones quakes and he gives voice to the movement of the Divine within.

B. Isaiah 1: 24-28

1. ***“Therefore, the sovereign Lord who commands armies, the powerful Ruler of Israel, says this:
“Ah, I will seek vengeance against my adversaries,
I will take revenge against my enemies.
25 I will attack you;
I will purify your metal with flux.
I will remove all your slag.
26 I will reestablish honest judges as in former times,
wise advisers as in earlier days.
Then you will be called, ‘The Just City, Faithful Town.’”***
2. **This is the first pathway of Hope Isaiah proclaims: Justice Is Coming. That justice will indeed come through the corrupt system being pulled down.** Isaiah goes to great lengths, chapters and chapters describing the downfall of everything around them. It's a

prophecy of gloom and doom, to be sure, but for the faithful in Judah it is also a word of hope. Because injustice has become so deeply entrenched, so strongly fortified, that it takes a massive revolution, cosmic level to right things.

3. For those without power, words like these are profound, Isaiah 5:8-15:

a) *'Those who accumulate houses are as good as dead, those who also accumulate landed property until there is no land left, and you are the only landowners remaining within the land. 9 The Lord who commands armies told me this: "Many houses will certainly become desolate, large, impressive houses will have no one living in them. 10 Indeed, a large vineyard will produce just a few gallons, and enough seed to yield several bushels will produce less than a bushel." 11 Those who get up early to drink beer are as good as dead, those who keep drinking long after dark until they are intoxicated with wine. 12 They have stringed instruments, tambourines, flutes, and wine at their parties. So they do not recognize what the Lord is doing, they do not perceive what he is bringing about. 13 Therefore my people will be deported because of their lack of understanding. Their leaders will have nothing to eat, their masses will have nothing to drink.... 15 Men will be humiliated, they will be brought low; the proud will be brought low.*

- b) The prophet is speaking justice coming to greed and exploitation.**

- (1) not wrong to own property, but the property was meant to be equally distributed, for every family to have what they need; not for a few power hungry land grabbers to cheat others out of their inheritance and claim all the land for themselves.
(2) Not wrong to enjoy music or wine, but to exploit others so they can have no leisure while the powerful party continuously, is unjust.

- 4. So it is a word of judgment, yes, but the judgment is good news to those who are watching the catastrophe play out and feel helpless to do anything about it.**

- a) As a woman who has experienced sexual violence and experienced the pressure to remain silent for the good of the family system and the safety of the sexually violent rather than the survivors, I regret to see these men be brought down, but I regret more their actions and it feels like a move toward justice.**
- b) In many ways, these words would have seemed ludicrous to those that heard them.** This was a ludicrous hope. Illogical. And yet it happened.
- (1) Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah was actually composed over a few centuries.** The first part of the book, which were looking at, are the prophecies of the Actual Isaiah. This is what Isaiah prophecies about the judgment to come. But after everything came to pass, when a small remnant of people returned to Jerusalem after their temple was destroyed, to live in exile they looked to these prophecies, they compiled them, they wrote new chapters, for they believed that this word was still ongoing. Some of it had been fulfilled and that was a source of power and strength. And it gave them hope for the parts that had yet to pass. Parts like these next words the original Isaiah is thought to have written. Words about where their story was going.

C. Isaiah 11:1-9

- 1. "A shoot will grow out of Jesse's root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots. 2 The Lord's spirit will rest on him—**

*a spirit that gives extraordinary wisdom,
a spirit that provides the ability to execute plans,
a spirit that produces absolute loyalty to the Lord.*

3 He will take delight in obeying the Lord.

*He will not judge by mere appearances,
or make decisions on the basis of hearsay.*

**4 He will treat the poor fairly,
and make right decisions for the downtrodden of the earth.**

*He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and order the wicked to be executed.*

**5 Justice will be like a belt around his waist,
integrity will be like a belt around his hips.**

D. Second Pathway hope - A Different Kind of Leadership Is Coming

1. Stump of Jesse - Connection to David (Jesse was David's father)
 - a) the monarchy of which David was the great historic hero, the King after God's own heart, has been corrupt and ripped down. The tree has been chopped down, all that remains is a stump. But God will bring in time a leader that's worthy of their trust, that's rooted in the soil of God, even more so than David.
2. **A leader that isn't corruptible like so many of their political leaders because his loyalty is first and foremost to Yahweh**
 - a) - vs. 3 "He will take delight in obeying the Lord" -
(1) literally: 'his smelling is in the fear of the Lord' - this sensory kinesthetic depth of pleasure and satisfaction, and breath in honoring Yahweh
3. **A leader that doesn't "make decisions on the basis of hearsay"**
 - a) This July, the New York Times did a piece about the **phenomenon of having a television show that is watched so regularly by and apparently is so influential** with the President of the United States that the show has the capacity to influence political priorities, and has begun to program itself accordingly, as if it's a pitch room in the White House. Because of this unique phenomenon, the article called this morning cable news show, "Fox and Friends", "the most powerful TV show in America."
 - b) **In this kind of world, I find these words of Isaiah's profoundly comforting: there is truly nothing new under the sun.** The context changes, but the issues are the same. To any culture that **sees corrupt leadership that's easily led astray through hearsay, deception, Twitter, cable news, Isaiah promises a different model.** Leadership that sees clearly and isn't manipulated. That judges justly.
4. **Significance of wearing justice and integrity like a belt around his waist and hips:**
 - a) in those days, they wore tunics. The belt secured the tunic to the body; it held it closed. It was fundamental in that way. What stabilized everything else. It was also the place a man would hang his money and his sword. His money and sword, symbols of power, they are governed by justice and integrity.
 - b) **To stand in hope of these things for Isaiah's contemporaries was ludicrous. But it also was powerful.**
5. **That hope preserved them in Babylon, where they not only survived but actually wrote most of the cannon.** They collected these stories and all the others that had only been passed down orally at that point. They wrote them down because they believed the story wasn't over. Even in a dark moment when it was ludicrous to maintain belief, in the

middle of experiencing judgment, before there had been deliverance, hope burned with power.

6. **Centuries later, it was hope that the same God who had brought down the unjust systems and returned the remnant to Jerusalem, would not leave God's people without the leadership the Divine had promised.** It was that hope that kept devout people like Simeon and Anna going centuries later, who were watching and waiting and in touch with that powerful thing in the bones that cannot be denied, and perceived it when a young woman and her husband brought their newborn Yeshua, Jesus, to be dedicated at the temple. Hope is what brought Simeon to praying in his old age, ***“Now, according to your word, Sovereign Lord, permit your servant to depart in peace.³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: ³² a light, for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”***

E. **This Haven journey has included many moments of having to stand in commitment to what I felt in my bones, even if I couldn't see how it could come to pass, even if it felt ludicrous.**

1. It had been **nearly ten years** that I had been carrying in some way this word that someday Jason and I would start a church when **crisis hit**.
 - a) For about five of those years I carried it quietly, believing perhaps Jesus was preparing Jason to be the pastor and I was only invited to pray for him and for this dream until God made that clear. **Five years in, God made clear it was not Jason but me who was called to lead this someday community.** I began to see the **dream of this community as a pregnancy**, that I had been carrying for a long time and that I would carry until it was full term and ready to be birthed. I started seminary in pursuit of this dream, learning Greek while fighting morning service, writing theology papers while nursing babies. We moved our little family to Iowa so I could apprentice a female lead pastor. **And yet in the midst of it all, it became clear my husband had lost his connection to faith.**
 - b) **The loss had been building for a while, brought on by significant trauma in his life, but in this season it became clear.** And it introduced all kinds of questions. **How could we start a church if my husband no longer believed church was relevant or helpful? How could he really be for me pursuing ministry if he questioned the value of faith? What would it mean for our parenting? For our marriage? How could we walk life's path together when I understood my life's journey as being surrendered to Jesus and he no longer was convinced Jesus was real?**
2. **In that time I began to fear this pregnancy would become a miscarriage.** Due to trauma outside myself, the baby couldn't be born. I wept, I sobbed, in that fear. But I also sensed in my bones something deeper. God's invitation to hope. To believe in God's capacity to carry my baby to term. To stand in the expectation that my Mother God would bring to completion the good thing She had begun in me.
3. And years later, I stand here a pastor, married to a man who loves me and is walking his own journey of faith alongside me, because that God did.

III. Conclusion: **So this Advent, in a time of stress and discouragement, what does the gift of Hope offer us?**

A. Pathway of resistance

1. Michael Schreiner - Psychologist and writer who says **“Despair is a sedative.”** Despair the opposite of hope - its a sense that things are set in place and cannot be changed. And

that brings apathy. Schreiner points out that is the goal of an oppressor to instill despair and apathy in the people whom he or she is trying to oppress, so that those people will be sedated against rising up and activating change.

2. **If this is true than the cultivation of hope, rather than submission to the sedative of despair is actually an act of resistance.** It is the power to declare that all is not lost. That change is possible.
3. DeRay McKesson, activist in the Movement for Black Lives, **“I think about hope as the idea that you can think about tomorrow as being better than today.”** Hope offers a pathway of resistance.
4. **As followers of Jesus, we have an active hope.** Like our forefathers and foremothers, the story we are a part of as Jesus followers is not over. **Our hope is in the risen Christ.** Our hope is that there are chapters to come, and the final one will include Ultimate Justice for every Injustice. It will include the ludicrous but we feel it in our bones reality of him returning and setting all things right. It includes a different kind of leader renewing creation and leading with integrity.

B. Pathway of Connection

1. It was the **Spirit of Yahweh on Isaiah** that inspired the words we’ve been reflecting on today
2. It was the **Spirit of Yahweh on the Messiah** that Isaiah looked forward to, a Spirit we believe as followers of Jesus made itself known to all who were there to see or have heard the story of God’s anointing **coming like a dove and lighting on Jesus at the moment of his baptism**, empowering the work he was to do of bringing justice and integrity the world around him
3. The **Spirit of Yahweh** that raised him up, when all the powers of corruption and injustice tried to bring him down.
4. And **it’s that same Spirit of Yahweh that Jesus said he was giving to his followers to continue his work of bringing justice, integrity and hope in the world.** It’s that Spirit that planted a word in me that would someday become Haven. It’s that Spirit that kept it alive. And the Spirit is available to all of us, even, and I think especially in seasons of stress and distress.

C. As we end, take a moment to cultivate that connection, guided meditation.

1. Close your eyes, get comfortable. Take a moment to focus on your breathing. Observe a few breaths, in and out.
 - a) What is the most significant issue of stress or discouragement in your life right now? What comes to mind? Reflect on it for a moment. What does this subject look like? Is it a specific incident, a merry that comes to mind? Is it more of an ongoing issue? Try to distill down to a moment. A 30 second clip video if you were gonna share on social media would illustrate your discouragement.
 - b) Now I’m gonna invite you to welcome the Spirit of God into that video clip. What does Jesus’ coming, what does the Spirit’s coming and bringing with it justice and integrity and healing do to your experience? How might it transform it? you may see a picture of Jesus in our imagination entering the video, perhaps pursuing some action. You may more have a sense of feeling the Spirit’s presence with you in the discouragement. Don’t try to force anything. Just let it be what it is and invite God’s presence that is with you and in you to speak to you an offering of Hope today.
 - c) wait a few minutes
2. Transition to a brief time of conversation.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

1. How have you thought about hope traditionally? Is it something you're often in touch with, or not? What would it mean for you to experience hope as a pathway forward?
2. Where are you in need of a pathway of resistance? Or a pathway of connection?
3. Share your experience of our time of guided meditation.