

## On Hope: Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Advent marks the new year in the Christian liturgical calendar, but this new year's observance is not filled with the sounds of Auld Lang Syne, toasts, or countdowns. We say, "Happy New Year," yet Advent is not happy. Advent is hopeful.

Theologian Miroslav Volf distinguishes between hope and optimism. Optimism entails a positive outlook on the future based upon generally favorable conditions in the recent past. While some people may be more likely to see the glass as half-full, optimism is only possible if there is water in the glass to begin with.

However, hope is still possible in dry, barren places. The writers of the Scripture readings in Advent lived during times of suffering. The Old Testament prophets, who we read as pointing to Jesus Christ, suffered under the Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors. Christ was born under the Roman Empire. For Jews, as well as many Gentiles, there was little reason for optimism. Yet, these people had radical hope that the kingdom of God would break in.

Thinking about hope, I recall the words of the poet of Psalm 42: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for the Living God." Hope is something you long for, and the longing is holy prayer.

In the Children's Chapel at UNC Hospital, there is a three-ring binder that sits upon a small table. Blank pages have been three-hole punched and placed in the binder. People write their prayers for themselves and their loved ones—prayers of longing. Some of these prayers take up multiple pages; others are only a sentence or two. Some of these prayers are illustrated with crayons; others are smudged with what might have been tears falling on the page. I can feel the hope coming off the pages—deep longing, like a soul thirsty for God.

Prayer is not the only thing that happens at a hospital. There are amazing doctors, surgeons, and nurses. Writer Rebecca Solnit distinguished hope from mere optimism by saying that optimism expects things to get better as the natural course of events, while hope gets to work. Hope wears surgical gloves and work gloves. Hope reaches out to join hands with others.

We are grateful for Karinda and Brian, who are here from CORE—Community Organizing for Racial Equity. During and especially after the service, our friends will discuss collaborative opportunities. In a recent email, Karinda reflected "on the unwavering hope that continues to guide us at CORE. We believe that building a better future starts with learning together, healing together, and taking action

together.” She then acknowledged that “the road ahead is challenging” and proclaimed, “Because of people like you, we are able to hold onto the powerful force of radical hope.” Preach it!

Karinda and Bryan can tell us more about what radical hope specifically looks like in our community. The Latin phrase "forming a root" is the source of the word radical. Radical means rooted and grounded. Once we are grounded, we can hope to heal. And healing takes many forms, not all of which take place in hospitals.

The Apostle Paul expressed radical hope as a beautiful blessing that "your love would increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else" (1 Thess. 3:12). Love, like hope, requires action; love is also received when we are rooted and grounded, our hands and our hearts reaching for connection to others and to the Coherent Mercy Jesus called Abba.

Marilyn Nelson, a Black poet, activist, and contemplative, once described her participation in a retreat to organize community action. It was a busy day of formulating strategies and plans. Great stuff! After one particularly long session, Nelson slipped away and sat on a bench underneath a maple tree. She put her feet on the ground and began to breathe, slowly and quietly. Then, she heard what she took to be the voice of the Holy One: “Let me love you.”

Nelson concluded, “We long for and hope for not an abstraction, but a god who has assumed a face—the face of everyone we meet. And this leads to service.”

This Advent, this new year in the life of the church, I hope we can serve one another and the larger community. I also want to have time for stillness in order to notice such subtle graces as the last of the red maple’s leaves clinging to the branch, the frost glittering on the grass, and the deer poised to spring from the edge of the woods.

I not only hope to pay attention to nature, but also my interior landscape—my worries, insecurities, and doubts. I have lost loved ones this year, and I want to take time to remember them and to grieve their loss. To breathe deeply and feel.

Hope, then, is something as simple and as profound as breath. I’ve written breath prayers for us during Advent, but you certainly don’t need to limit yourself to my words. Maybe you don’t need any words. Simply to become aware of your body as you inhale and exhale is to practice radical hope—to root yourself in your holy being and ground yourself in holy life. Remind yourself that you share kinship not only with your relatives but also with all God's creatures, including the earth and

seas that the Lord has created. Everything is entwined, each a part of everything else, a profound truth that quantum science has recently discovered and that mystics have long intuitively known.

So, I return to the holiday we recently celebrated last Thursday and the Apostle's statement of belief, which is ironically phrased as disbelief: "How can we thank God enough?" This statement resonates not only during Thanksgiving but also in a world that presents significant difficulties and challenges, a world that requires radical hope.

For, even in the midst of tragedy and loss, one often hears words of gratitude. Gratitude for the doctors who tried to save a loved one's life. Gratitude for the love of others shown in times of need and distress. Even a glimmer of reconciliation in a relationship deemed irreparable inspires gratitude. Gratitude for the gift of life itself, with its mixed bag of joy and suffering.

Gratitude most naturally springs from our awareness that we have been given something we have not earned. In a word, grace. Advent marks the beginning of a new year, yet we have a timeless tale of God's love. And therein lies our greatest hope, the voice of the Holy One: "Let me love you."

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