

Prayer: We gather around our wreath to begin the celebration of Advent. Let us ask our Father in heaven to fill our hearts with grace. On the First Sunday of Advent, we light **THE CANDLE OF HOPE**. We have hope because God is ever faithful and will keep the promises made to us. Our **HOPE** comes from God.

“ADVENT IN PLAIN SIGHT - GATES”

For the season of Advent, we will be walking through some of the vivid imagery of Jill J. Duffield’s book *Advent in Plain Sight*. In her daily Advent devotional, she reflects on tangible objects for every week of Advent in the hopes that these physical items will help us learn something about God. This week, we are focusing on gates and what gates might have to teach us.

Gates are usually part of fences, and they can either keep things out or let things in. I remember our pig pen. If you didn’t keep the gate closed, when you’d wake up in the morning, there’d be pigs all in the garden, enjoying a feast! Gates keep things out or let things in. In both of our readings this morning, the gate seems to be the threshold between our past and what is in store in future days. It’s a place of change and expectation and anticipation. Dare I say it’s a place where holy wonder and imagination are possible?

Let’s pause a moment and look at the Book of Genesis. In Genesis we learn that Jacob has been sent out by his father in the hopes that Jacob will find a wife from among his people. He is fleeing after having tricked by Esau out of his birthright, so this journey carries with it all the fear of Jacob’s past actions catching up with him and the anticipation about whether Jacob will find someone to marry when he gets to where he’s going. Jacob thought he was running away from his brother and toward marriage, but in his dream, he realizes that what was waiting for him on this journey wasn’t just the promise of a wife, but a promise from God.

Here’s how our story tells it: “And the Lord stood beside Jacob and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac your father; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’”

It’s in this uncertain place that Jacob encounters God and the vision of “Jacob’s ladder,” though it was probably a pyramid-like structure – than a ladder. It’s this scene from the Bible that gave rise to the familiar spiritual song “We Are Climbing Jacob’s ladder.” It was a song about belonging in the body of Christ, and about continuing to grow on one’s spiritual journey. In this dream, Jacob realizes that even though he’s running from his brother, he cannot outrun belonging in the family of God. Jacob wakes up from his strange and otherworldly dream, and he describes the place where he had spent the night as “none other than the house of God” and “the gate of heaven.”

God makes a promise to Jacob that sounds a lot like the promise God made to Abraham. God promises to make Jacob’s descendants so numerous they are like dust. And there’s that beautiful line about all the families being blessed through Jacob and Jacob’s children. But the part that stands out to me the most in this promise is God’s promise to be with Jacob always. Jacob can run away from his past. He can run away from the consequences of his trickster actions, but he cannot run away from the protective and loving presence of God. Even when he’s exhausted and finds himself with a rock under his head for a pillow, God is drawing near and reminding Jacob that he is not alone.

On this “hope week” in Advent, there are two things for us to keep in mind. First, hope is at the gates. And second, we carry with us hope’s signs.

Hope is at the gates. When we are going through our daily lives, even when we are consumed with our own selves or the problems of our own making, hope is at the gates. Often, we don’t rest long enough to have an encounter with God, but now and then something might happen that brings us back to our senses and reminds us that we are on holy ground.

We all need a place, or an activity, that opens wide the possibilities for these kinds of encounters with God. The truth is, God can make an opportunity out of anything. God can shake us out of our daze and wake us up to what’s going on around us. But, how much better it is when we can make space for those glimpses of hope and Spirit every day. I personally prefer

that to having to have a spiritual 2×4 upside the head to wake me up, but goodness knows that is what it takes sometimes too.

For me, one place I find these opportunities is outside with my girls, Cookie and Sadie. I love evenings when I open the patio door of the parsonage and watch them gleefully running around the backyard. They spot a squirrel and take off to capture it. They play fight with each other. And they teach me things about the unique way they are made, and about how I can better open myself up to what God is doing in the world and in my own heart. Many people know the committed and unconditional love of dogs. They're our companions, always along for the ride no matter what ups and downs life brings. They show us joy and make us laugh, and even listen to us like they know exactly what we're saying. They greet us at the door every day, love us absolutely, and even help humans live longer, happier lives.

Something about the mixture of faithfulness and purity of a dog's love reminds me of hope. Hope is like a gift that seems just out of reach sometimes. It seems like it is just on the other side of the gate and we won't be able to reach out and hold onto it for ourselves. But right when we've given up on hope, we hear someone next to us call out, "I found some! It's over here!"

Friends, hope is at the gate. We are so close to it. And even though it might seem like it is too far, the signs are calling out to us. This brings us to the second point: We carry with us hope's signs. In our reading from Matthew 24, Jesus talks about a fig tree. He says, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates."

We know it is springtime when the crocuses and daffodils start to push through the snow. We know it is almost harvest time as the corn tassels start to appear above the stalks. We have all kinds of signs we look for to help us understand the weather: If a woolly bear caterpillar is mostly black, it will be a tough winter; the number of days with fog indicate the number of snowstorms we might have; the sound of the geese honking and calling as they fly lets us know the weather is going to change. Jesus is right. We are pretty good at reading the signs of the seasons. But we aren't always so skilled with understanding the signs that Jesus is drawing near to us.

I believe this is one reason Jesus called us to be in community with each other. When we get so bogged down with the troubles of life, we need others to show us the signs of hope. We need to listen and hear the call of others who have found something so beautiful they can't keep it to themselves. When any one of us are too weary to hope on our own, we can look to others among us to point us towards hope's signs and remind us that hope is out there. It's at the gates. It's on its way to us.

Julian of Norwich, well-known mystic, once wrote, "The fullness of joy is to see God in everything." And I agree. There are glimpses of God's movement and presence all around us. But I would add that the fullness of hope is to see God in others. Hope is at the gate. Even now. Even in the midst of this world so riddled with pain and tragedy. Even here in our community that is beautifully transforming into a diverse Beloved Community. Even in our world that continues to struggle under the weight of numerous "isms", economic uncertainty, and division. Hope is at the gate.

Our calling is to show forth those glimmers of hope in the way we live with one another. We don't do this by pretending to have it all together or by denying the difficulties we face, but by allowing the light to shine forth in the gaps and spaces. We can be those glimpses of hope to others, and we can be renewed by catching sight of those glimpses of hope in those around us.

This season of Advent, remember that the candle of hope on the Advent wreath shines the longest. It sticks with us throughout these darkening days, and it lights the way so that we can find our way to Jesus, who is waiting for us with outstretched arms. Hope is at the gate. And, when we forget that, we have each other to remind us of the signs and show us the way. To God be the glory! Amen.