

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent (Year C)

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*Jeremiah 33:14-16*

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'*

*Psalm 25:1-10*

*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.*

*Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!*

*Good and upright is the Lord;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.  
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

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“Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.” These words come from the mouth of Andy Dufresne, the protagonist of one of my favorite movies of all time, the *Shawshank Redemption*. Andy was a big shot banker until he was falsely accused and convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. Throughout the movie (or the majority of the movie, I should say), he is imprisoned at Shawshank here in New England and endures incredible hardships that he certainly does not deserve. Despite these tribulations year after year after year of his length incarceration, Andy does not give up hope. His hope is embodied in actions that he seeks that give him purpose. During his time at Shawshank, Andy expands the prison library, tutors a young inmate to help him graduate high school,

increases his sway with the prison guards by doing their taxes, and even helps his fellow inmates do some prestigious outdoor detail including a nice bottle of beer for each once their finished. Simply put, Andy's hope manifests itself by giving him direction in a disorienting environment and, quite literally, keeps him sane during this underserved imprisonment. During his time at Shawshank, he befriends a fellow inmate by the name of Red who struggles with Andy's unabashed hope. At one point, Andy gets Red a harmonica after learning that he used to play a mean one, but Red refuses to play it because music, to him, represented hope and, in his opinion, hope was a foolish thing to have in the midst of such pain and suffering. After their friendship had grown strong, Red said to Andy, "hope is a dangerous thing, hope can drive a man insane."

On this first Sunday in Advent, the one where we historically celebrate the hope we have in the coming Christ-child, we can feel like we're torn between the sentiments of Andy and Red. On the one hand, we might lift up hope because, like Andy, we believe that it is a good thing, perhaps the best of things. On the other hand, we might give into our cynical selves and agree with Red by confessing that hope is a dangerous thing that can drive us mad.

So, here we are, in this liturgical tug-of-war, caught between hope and a reality that often appears devoid of it.

The people who received this word from the prophet Jeremiah knew a thing or two about being caught between hope and circumstances that seemed to deny it. For many long, long years, they had been held captive in a foreign land by the Babylonians who had taken them from their homes and enslaved them. Everything that had seemed familiar and comforting to the Israelites had been taken from them. "Where is God in all this?" they must have asked. "What have we done to deserve this?" "What justice is there to be found in this senseless violence?" "How can God stand to let such atrocities happen?"

I would be willing to bet an enormous amount of money that none of these questions sound unfamiliar to us. Like you, I've watched and read the news. I've questioned God's presence in terrible terrorist attacks. I've stood disenchanted with politicians and their followers as they protest accepting Syrian refugees. I've wondered why we have trouble with the specificity of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. I've shook my head repeatedly at why the people of this country continue to listen to a politician (who shall remain nameless) running for president that has no business running this country (or any country for that matter). Another school shooting, another friend succumbing to addiction, another marriage torn apart, another immigrant struggling to find the "American dream."

"Hope is a dangerous thing," I hear Red saying, "hope can drive a man insane."

Now, for some, this sentiment is a valid statement. Red said this statement because he was a man waiting to be redeemed, a man waiting to be shown the promise of hope. But for others, for those in power, for those who wish for things to remain the same, like those, for instance, who are members of ISIS who come not in the name of religion but in the name of terror, hope is a dangerous thing because it leads people to want something better, something truer, something stronger and lasting than the suffering of this broken world. For these people, they would hope that hope stays closeted, that it remains buried and unspoken. For those purporting violence and hatred, hope is their biggest enemy. For those of us who wish for a better world, hope is our best ally.

In the context of today's passage from Jeremiah, Walter Brueggemann has suggested that God is not merely instrumental to the hope of the Israelites, "but that God is, in fact, the very substance of that

hope.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, hope is not seeing the world with rose-colored glasses. Rather, hope is quite the opposite; it admits the brokenness of the world and professes that God, alone, is our hope. Hope is not something we passively wait for; rather, hope is something that we actively pursue because we believe God is calling us as partners in ushering in the hope-filled future that has been promised to us. The season of Advent calls us to remind one another of this important mission. The Church is the ultimate voice of hope in a world that needs to hear it so desperately. This mission of hope is perhaps the most crucial job that you and I have to do.

“Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies”

The Israelites were looking for that “good thing” so very desperately amid the dangerous waters of the Babylonian Exile. They were a people going through the most traumatic of experiences. When humans go through traumatic experiences, we get disoriented. Trauma is, literally, that which rips us from that which keeps us grounded, that which tears us from what is known and what it is that gives us stability and fulfillment. When trauma strikes, the human instinct is to find direction and purpose. In the Shawshank redemption, Andy practiced this from the get-go. Red, however, struggled with it. Red was, apparently, not well versed in the practices of the Israelites because they knew that traumatic times called for relentless hope.

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’*

As we’ve mentioned before, hope without direction has no purpose. Hope *with* direction is the strongest of powers. If the book of Jeremiah gives us hope, then today’s lectionary Psalm passage gives us a direction in which to place it, a context in which to put it. Psalm 25 reminds us that to hope in something means that we must first *trust* in something or, more accurately, *someone*. And as disciples, we know that trust is not a static state of mind but rather a journey. And journeys require direction.

The direction of the writer of Psalm 25 is rather clear. The Psalmist proclaims unabashed hope and seeks it by asking God for guidance and direction.

*O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.*

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 497.

Psalm 25 reminds us at the beginning of this Advent season that our hope in the midst of pain and suffering is made valid by seeking guidance and knowing the direction in which we are heading. This is not always easy. In a world that seems to have gone to hell in a hand basket, our hopes can feel as empty and lonely as that one Advent candle that we lit today that seems to wait for its brother and sister candles to join it in its shining.

“Hope is a dangerous thing, hope can drive a man insane.”

And yet...

And yet, as Advent begins its hopeful journey, we join the Psalmist in asking God’s guidance to direct our hope. We lift up our hope to God, we proclaim our trust in the Lord.

*Make me to know your ways, we pray.*

*Teach me your paths, we plea.*

*Lead us in your truth, we beg.*

*For you we wait all day long, we confess.*

*Here’s our hope, we pray, here’s our hope, God. You are our hope. Give us direction and purpose.*

And so, as we begin yet another Advent journey let us be reminded of the direction to which we are heading.

Advent sends us towards joy. If you haven’t already done so, I invite you to read today’s epistle passage from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. In it, Paul gives thanksgiving for the joy which was founded when he preached to and with the people in Thessalonica. This passage reminds us that hope is to be found when we preach the Gospel together. The beginning of that gospel message is the story that we are walking toward with Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, and the Wise guys. When the world seems to suggest that we are heading toward pain and suffering and violence, we, as the Church, proclaim that God’s ultimate promise for our existence is peace and hospitality.

Secondly, Advent sends us towards trust in God’s providence. The world gives us a slew of things in which to place our trust. Trust the politicians. Trust the advertising. Trust the latest health craze. Trust your Facebook feed. Trust in whatever it is that everyone thinks you are or thinks you should be. A million and one things cry out to us to trust but we are called to trust in one thing and that is God. Now, if you’re like me, you want evidence. Advent reminds us of the story of God’s desire to be with us in the flesh. We worship a God who is not content to remain away from us. Rather, we worship a God who desires to live with us in the flesh. That is cause for joy. That is cause to trust God’s intentions for our lives.

Thirdly, and finally, Advent sends us towards hope in a better future. I do not know one parent who does not want a better future for their children. If we wish for a better future for ourselves and our families, imagine how much more God wishes for a better future for all of humanity! Together, with God, we are called as partners to live into the hope of that which has been promised to us. Here, we would do well to remind ourselves of the promise made to us a few weeks ago when we journeyed with the passage from the Book of Revelation that promised a day when death and dying would be no more, when God will wipe away the tears from every eye, and pain and grief would be no more. Friends, surely those days are coming and we certainly have work to do in the meantime.

Hope is a good thing, perhaps the best of things, and hope is the most integral part of the work we have to do in this season of Advent and moving forward. We place our trust in someone bigger than us who called us into being and brings into being God in the flesh. There is a longing in our hearts. We long for a peaceful world, for a world in which pain and death and dying will be no more.

Andy Dufresne is not the only character who is redeemed in the *Shawshank Redemption*. His cynical friend Red who, for so long, believed that hope was a dangerous thing eventually was led to embrace the hope that his friend had so long clung to. The movie ends with both friends outside the walls of the prison in a better place where tears are no more. This happened because Andy, who trusted in hope, invited Red over and over again to join him in it. It took a while, it was not an easy journey, but, eventually, Red opened himself up to hope and allowed himself to be transformed by it.

That, friends, is our Advent task: to open one another up to hope. To invite one another to trust in God's goodness. And if you have one iota of doubt that that is needed in today's world, simply open up your web browser or look at the front page of the newspaper. There is much need for the work that we have to do, even on our little corner of the world that we call Shelter Island. There are so many people here among us, (including ourselves!) that are craving for hope. May we be vehicles of it in the weeks and years to come.

"Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.