

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
December 4, 2011

Once Upon a Time for Real: A Word of Hope

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

A voice cries out:

*'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'*

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

*The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

*The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;*

say to the cities of Judah,

'Here is your God!'

*See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

They needed a word of hope. Nationally unemployment stood at 25%. Gross Domestic Product, the total output of goods and services had fallen by more than 40%. The Dow Jones had declined by

90%. The suicide rate had risen by 20%. Real investment in the economy had declined by 83%. Wages had fallen by 20%. And even the fertility rate had declined by a similar percentage. The year was 1934. The place was the United States. The event was the Great Depression. Many of you lived through it. Many of you were shaped by it. But in those dark days the nation needed a word of hope. And so they turned to the man they had elected as president in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Now I realize that FDR was either beloved or despised. Regardless though of how people felt he understood that part of his role was to bring a word of hope. He did so not only with reading the comics to the nation on Sunday mornings or with his “fire-side chats” but also with phrases such as:

- We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world on the horizon.
- There is nothing to fear but fear itself.
- When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.

FDR got it. He was to offer hope for better future.

They needed a word of hope. The people of first century Judea and Galilee needed a word of hope. They needed a word because farmers were being driven off of their lands by taxes and the incredible interest they had to pay on loans to purchase seed. People in small communities were going hungry because the produce of the nation was being bought up by traders to sell in the large cities and to Rome itself. Their national religion, that of worshipping YHWH was in danger by the rapid growth of Greco-Roman cities in which foreign gods were worshipped and foreign customs were being practiced. And above all of this was the reality that Rome ruled them. Rome was the foreign power that took what it wanted. So into that reality stepped John the Baptizer. John brought a word of hope; a word of hope from God. Returning to the words of the prophet Isaiah John reminded the people that God was not done with them; that God was still getting ready to do something new.

- I am the messenger who is preparing the way for God’s messiah
- God’s messiah is on his way so get ready.

John was offering a word of hope.

John however was doing more than offering a word of hope; he was calling people to get ready for the reality of that hope. When John called upon people to be baptized for the repentance of sins he was literally asking them to turn their backs on one way of seeing the world and to open their eyes to the new thing that God was doing. He wanted people to be ready to see this messiah who could come and set God’s people free. John offered a word of hope along with a ritual action which would prepare people to see the hope when it arrived.

We need a word of hope. We live in the midst of the deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression. At other times there have been recessions which have hit parts of the nation for short periods of time, but now we are in a downturn which is impacting not only the entire nation but the entire world. Our economic fate is still tied up with Europe, China and the rest of the world. We live in a metro area in which Detroit is on the verge of bankruptcy, their schools continue to fail, the state is cutting back on education funding and the government in DC cannot agree on a budget that will help set us on the road to recovery. We need a word of hope; which is why I am so grateful that Advent has arrived. I am grateful not just because Black Friday and Cyber Monday were such great successes; or because there are predictions of more jobs here in Michigan, but because I am reminded that God is still at work in the world. The words of John and Isaiah are not mere once upon a time words. They are words that speak of the reality of God’s love for and action in the world.

The gift of this day however is that it offers us more than a word of hope. We are offered an opportunity to turn toward that hope. We are invited to come to this table and be reminded that the God of the universe is also the God who cares for each of; that the God of this universe cared enough to come in human form to give us new life; that the God of this universe cared enough to offer us a place in which hope is always found. We are enabled to hear that Isaiah's words and John's words were not merely intended for some lost moments in time, but that they were intended for our moment as well. As we say in our communion liturgy, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. God is still at work... and so we have hope. My challenge to you this morning then is to ask yourself these questions, "How am I living into this hope in my life? How is the hope Advent offers changing the way I see and relate to the world around me."