

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
People Get Ready: Hope
Rev. Dr. John Judson
December 21, 2014

Isaiah 11:1-10
Luke 1:26-38

I have a confession to make this morning. It is not something I have ever admitted in public, but here goes. I miss some of the political advertisements. There I have said it and I feel better for it. Now let me be clear I do not miss the attack ads; those that tried to imply that whoever the candidate's opponent was regularly had lunch with Satan. No, the ads that I miss are those that were so absurd that they ended up being, well, silly. To be sure you know what I am talking about let me give you a couple of examples, from both sides of the isle. In all of these please notice the "I", what I will do. "I will make congress quit fighting and get back to work." "I will secure our borders." "I will balance the national budget" "I will put Michiganders back to work." I will restore the cuts made to education, remove the tax on retirees and make Michigan work again." If you and I were to take a deep breath and actually think about these statements rather than tuning them out we would see just how silly they were, and are. No one person, not even Jesus, could accomplish these things. And, just as a final observation, no first term congressperson or governor could do them either.

So why do I miss them? I miss them because they are reminders of humanity's desperate need for hope. How so? They demonstrate this need because regardless of how silly these promises are, we still turn out and vote. That's right we get up on the First Tuesday in November, stand in line and cast our ballots for people who have made silly promises; yet in the end promises we hope they can keep. My guess is that we hope that there is someone out there who can get congress to quit fighting, act like grownups and do what is best for the nation. And I believe that is so because hope, the hope for a better today and tomorrow, is hard wired into the human psyche. It is often said that when we have our health we have everything. I'm not sure that is correct. I would argue that as long as we have our hope we have everything. I say that because as long as we have hope we can endure almost anything. The flip side is that whenever people abandon hope, it is as if death has arrived. They slip away one piece at a time. So we human beings need and long for hope.

Hope is something that God understands. I say this because this book (the Bible) is a story of hope. Throughout it, when God's people have found themselves in tight places; places from which there appears to be no escape, God offers a word of hope. These words of hope are at the heart of both of our stories this morning. The first, from Isaiah, concerns a moment in time when it appeared that all was lost for the nation. The nation was rotting from the inside and was under siege from the outside. On the inside the powerful had used their money and power to gain control over the people in such a way that for the ordinary citizen there was no justice and no future. From the outside the great nation of Assyria was literally at the gates planning on the

total destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Yet the Prophet Isaiah brings a word of hope. He tells the people that God will send a king who will change all of this. This king will bring justice and usher in a new age in which people will not only live peacefully with one another but with creation itself. It is one of the most profound statements of hope in all of the scriptures.

Our second story arises in the midst of a time which, though not quite as dire, was also one in which the ordinary citizen was oppressed and helpless. As we have talked about on other occasions, the time in which Jesus is born into the world is one in which Rome and her minions exercised great control over virtually every aspect of everyday life. Now, to be fair, the Jews had more freedom than virtually any other religious group within the Empire. Nonetheless, Rome heavily taxed the people by taking both money and crops, encouraged the creation of larger and larger landholdings in order to maximize production, and projected not only their military might, but their cultural values on a Jewish nation who found them abhorrent. In a sense hopelessness was on the horizon. So into this situation an angel appears to a young peasant woman in Galilee. The angel has an amazing message for her. She will bear a son, name him Jesus and he will reign over a kingdom that will have no end.” This was the sign. This was the one who come from the stump of Jesse (remember Isaiah?) and bring about justice and equity on the earth. This was the word of hope for which not only Mary, but all of Judea, had been waiting to hear.

The only problem with these promises was that they appeared to be as silly as those made by the politicians for whom we vote. What kind of a promise tells the people that the Assyrians who have demolished cities and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people could be turned away by Jerusalem’s walls or Judah’s decimated army. What kind of a promise tells a young, peasant woman living in the back-water burg of Nazareth that she would be the mother of a king who would rule an eternal empire and bring justice to the world? These are the kind of promises that make people not vote; that make people not want to believe. Yet the people believed. The people of Judah chose not to surrender even in the face of almost certain death. Mary believed the angel. Mary believed enough to say to the angel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” In a sense, these people believed enough to vote; to vote for God’s radical, absurd, impossible words of hope. They voted for them not at the ballot box, but with their lives. They voted by acting upon the promises trusting that they were true. And they were true. The Assyrians, returned home, leaving Jerusalem intact. Mary gave birth to the messiah of the world, who continues to usher in a new world order of justice and compassion.

The question before us this morning then is are we ready to vote for the word of hope that comes down to us? Are we willing to believe that God is still at work in the world in such a way that our future can be better than our present and our past? We are living in a moment of great pessimism. Following the last election 48% of Americans said that life would be worse for future generations than it is today. Only 22% said that it would be better. It is easy to see what people feel this way; a transforming economy, the loss of low-skilled well-paying jobs, the crisis in pension funds, the massive debt held by cities and states. The list goes on. It would be easy for us, as the church, to throw up our hands and give up all hope. Yet that is not the task to which we have been called. We have been called to be a people of hope. We are the inheritors of the promises to Isaiah and Mary. We are those who follow the one who has initiated a

kingdom in which love, compassion and justice are not merely dreams but possibilities. We are those who follow the one who gave his life that we might be new people capable of carrying out his hopeful promises. We are the followers of the one who called us to be those who make hope our aim.

On this last Sunday of Advent, we are called to be people of hope. So here is my question for you, “How am I voting for hope with my words, my deeds and my beliefs?”