

Advent 3B  
December 13, 2020

In the book 'The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe' four children stumble into a cold, dark place called Narnia. Narnia is a land where it is always dark, always winter, and Christmas never comes. The one visible glimmer of hope in Narnia is the lamppost, a light that shines on in the darkness of that cold place. And when the children go and come between a house in a London and the land called Narnia, whenever they see the light of that lamppost, they know they are home.

One of the main themes of this Advent season is waiting, waiting for Christmas, longing for Christ to come, for the light to once again come into the world and dispel the darkness. But waiting is hard for us whose lives are full of activity and production, with energy and busyness.

Today's reading tells us John the Baptist, too, knows what it means to wait. He does not seem too impatient with it, but those around him are. They surround John with an exam. "Who are you?" they ask. His best answer is borrowed from prophet Isaiah. He is a voice, one preparing the way for the Lord.

John tell them he is giving testimony to the light that is coming, the light that will shine on in the darkness and not be overcome.

Where is it? They ask. The world is still dark.

And the frustration in the voices of his interrogators is understandable, because they have been waiting for a long while.

"Are you it", they want to know, or if the John knows who is coming, they want the answer. They are sick and tired of all the pain in the world; the crushing poverty around them, the aggressive violence of the Roman Empire, the broken-hearted people who show up in their offices day after day. If the light is to come, they want it to come now.

Advent is about longing for the hope of a new day. During these dark days of December the world around us appear even more fragile than usual, more delicate, and more broken. Human service organizations report larger numbers of donations in the days leading up to Christmas. In some sense it is silly of course. The homeless are still homeless in July, the cold are colder come February, the elderly won't be any younger when March arrives, but at Christmas we become tender and our hearts bleed more for the pain of others. And this year has been a particularly painful year. It has been a dark year, and yet every year is a dark year in its own way. We wait in the darkness, and strain our eyes for the lamppost to shine the way home. We search for hope.

Madeline L'Engle tells a story about when her daughter was little, maybe 3 or 4 years old, and learning to sleep in her own room. She would often wake up in the middle of the night and make her way through the dark house to her mother's bedroom, where she'd climb in bed and wrap her arms around her mom, terrified of the loneliness and darkness. One night, frustrated, L'Engle, offered some new counsel. She tried to give her daughter confidence and self-reliance. "Honey, whenever you are scared, simply pray to God, God will protect you, God will always take care of you, God will be with you in the darkness." The girl looked into her mother's face, and said, "Mommy, that's fine, but I need a God with some skin on."

John's hope is in Isaiah's God, who has fulfilled past promises, and who has promised to redeem the world, to bind up the broken-hearted, to set the captives free, and to bring liberty to the oppressed. John and Isaiah together are giving testimony to hope in the coming Messiah, God who comes to us as a little baby, Jesus, God with skin on.

Earlier this month I was listening to a researcher from the University of Chicago, who talked about a study that showed that the single biggest key to living a healthy life is staying optimistic. "Optimists have less stress, healthier diets and get more exercise," she said in a warm and friendly voice, and continued: "Optimists generally believe things are getting better, humanity is improving, the world's problems are being solved." "We also discovered, she said, that optimists tend to live longer than other people!"

I thought, "I don't imagine John the Baptist and Jesus were optimists," both were dead before 33.

Christian hope is fundamentally different from optimism. Christian hope is a gift from God, it is rooted in the story of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Optimism is a story of what we desire to accomplish ourselves or our confidence in generality like "forward progress," or the age old belief that more money equals more meaning in life, or better exam grades will bring about a deeper sense of self worth.

Hope is different from cheeriness or a positive attitude.

Christian hope locks its eyes on the devastation of the world around it, and acknowledges that life may not always be too sunny.

Hope does not bury its head in Christmas cheer and artificial lights, but like an Advent wreath glowing stronger and brighter each week, this hope pushes its way into the brokenness of the world, and clears a path in the wilderness so the true light might burst into the darkness.

Christian hope is the conviction that God has given us everything we need to take part in Isaiah's vision of justice, healing and liberation, for ourselves and for others, the fullness of which is Jesus, the light of the world, the lamppost of true home.

Years ago I went to Dominican Republic with a group of people from Habitat for Humanity to help build a house after a natural disaster.

At the end of a week of sleeping on cement floors with no electricity and running water and

building a cinderblock house in the hot sun during the day, we gathered for a mass in the little village church.

When the priest blessed the body and blood of Christ and asked his people to come forward, they flocked towards him, all of them at once, hands outstretched. They approached the communion table as if someone were going to place a million dollars in their cupped hands, as if life itself was waiting for them at the front of the church.

I told the priest afterwards how moved I was by the faith of his people. "How do you do it at your church?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "the ushers line them all up in single file and people slowly move to the front.

"Lines," he said. "You make them wait in lines for the bread of life!"

"I don't know that anybody makes them. It's just sort of how we do it."

The old priest paused for a moment.

"Some of these people don't know where their next meal will come from. Some won't sleep under a roof tonight.

Christ is their hope. We can live for many days without food and shelter, but we cannot live for a single moment without hope."

So it is for us as well. We hold on to that hope.

Amen.