

“FINDING HOPE”

Isaiah 2:1-5

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The Assyrian armies are not far away. They have already conquered the northern kingdom, deported the best and the brightest to deep within the empire, moved their own people in, taking the best land, begun the process of assimilating the conquered. We will hear no more from the northern kingdom. Its people will not return from exile. They will never form a nation again. For them, hope is gone.

But Judah, and its capital, Jerusalem, remain intact as Isaiah comes on the scene. With Assyria on the doorstep, Isaiah delivers a promise from the Lord. Jerusalem will become great among the nations not by its military might, but as a center for learning. God will bring an end to war and establish peace. The peace won't come so that the people can rest secure within its borders. No, it comes so that the nations are safe to travel and learn about God.

According to Isaiah, the people won't have to do anything. God will make this happen. And indeed, political turmoil back in the capital draws the Assyrian armies away. The empire endures for a few more years, but never becomes a threat to Judah again.

This brings us to verse five which serves as a transition between the first and last part of the chapter. If Jerusalem is to become a place of learning as promised, then its inhabitants will need to “walk in the light of the Lord,” as verse five urges. But the exhortation is there precisely because the people are not “walking in the light.” The promises from the early verses become threats by the end of the chapter.

Now this is a very typical advent text. The pattern is familiar. The people find themselves under attack or difficult circumstances and the promise of better days is placed before them. The main thrust is of course the promise. In Advent we anticipate the coming of God into our world, but before we come to this, we must wrestle with our need for God, with the context of a world that seems broken, its peace under attack, its hope undermined.

And it would be easy to become paralyzed by fear, to give up hope. The people of Kyiv begin their winter without power for heat, for light, for cooking. Three shootings in ten days, evoked by hatred, anger, despair. We divide ourselves over “solutions.” Many think that we need better control over both access to guns and the types of guns, but too many legislators are beholden to the gun lobby, or to their voting base or to the principle of gun rights. Others think we need to invest more in mental health care services and there's no question that the profession is overburdened, that too many people are priced out of seeking help. But then legislatures don't work together to find the funding and tax payers seem unwilling to pay more. And this only makes one despair over a society that seems more intent on protecting the wealth of billionaires than on addressing the needs of the

poor, the marginalized, the homeless, and the hungry. And while we're wondering if gun violence is a problem relating to access to guns or lack of access to mental health services, what do we do about the fact that nearly all mass shootings are committed by men. Can it be that we, as a society, continue to value strength in the form of violence, in our men today?

We do we continue to protect the record breaking profits of the fossil fuel industry at the expense of the air we breathe? Why do we continue to excuse men for making inappropriate sexualized comments to their co-workers, to underpay and under-promote women?

A large part of the Christian church continues to see the love expressed between two men as abnormal and abhorrent to God. It continues to reject women as called by God to positions of authority. And many white Christians continue to see Black and Indigenous people as inferior. And then, there are, of course, my own list of inadequacies, that I struggle to shed.

But in Advent, we anticipate God's coming into this seemingly hopeless world. "Come, let us walk in the light," says the prophet, not in the world that talks about gun rights, financial freedom, exclusivity, and the rugged individual. Where do we find the courage to stand up to the forces destroying the world? How do we find hope in a world that sees one's own financial interest as more important than the welfare of people? How do we find hope in a world that values strength over compassion, independence over community, men over women, and the status quo over justice?

"Walk in the light." There is hope in that. Leonard Cohen opens his song, *Anthem* with these words:

"The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be"

Just keep singing, he seems to be saying. Don't worry about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow. This world needs a song, and as long as you're singing, there is hope. Cohen knows it's not a perfect world. He continues his song:

"Ah, the wars they will be fought again
The holy dove, she will be caught again
Bought and sold, and bought again
The dove is never free"

And then he sings the refrain, words to stick in your word, words that draw me back to Isaiah's "Walk in the light of the Lord," words that offer hope:

“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in”

It doesn't have to be perfect or in tune. Just “ring the bell!.. that's how the light gets in.” When the 911 call went out in Colorado, the police arrived only four minutes later. By then, the shooter had been subdued, presumably by people who weren't going to let fear paralyze them. I find hope in that. The police chief said in one of the most transparent and frank news releases I've heard, that there was no room for hate in their town. I find hope in that.

One news reporter observed that the people of Kyiv were not discouraged when the lights went out. The bonds of community are holding strong. Much of the world is trying to stand with them. I find hope in that.

I find hope in churches that set up electronic charging stations, in counties beginning to address instances of environmental racism, and in the commitments at COP-27 to contribute funds to the relief of poorer nations suffering from the impact of climate change.

I find hope in the growing number of churches willing to speak a word of welcome to the LGBTQ community, willing to acknowledge their complicity in the history of racism, and reexamine their own places of privilege.

But were it not for those in this faith community who choose to walk, however imperfectly, in the light of the Lord, the hope would not be enough. It's when God comes and moves within the faith community in which we live, that hope becomes felt and real. I find hope in this community's commitment to be expansive in its welcome, to be generous in the face of another's financial need, to recognize contributions to peacemaking, to be moved beyond gratitude to action when hearing the word.

So “ring the bells that still can ring.” Ring the bells of compassion that feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. Ring the bells of kindness that befriends the stranger, raises up the child, and binds up the wounded. Ring the bells of mercy that redeems the lost, reconciles enemies, and restores the soul. Ring the bells of love that heals pain, forgives harm, and embraces the other.

Ring the bells that still can ring. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be flashy. It doesn't even have to be noticed. On some level all offerings are imperfect. Ring the bells. Christ is coming. Ring the bells that crack open racism, that expose environmental destruction, that call out violence. Ring the bells that make peace, that multiply mercy, that restore relationships, that unite us in gratitude for one another. “That's how the light gets in... walking in the light of the Lord.” Ring the bells. That's where hope begins. Amen.