

I Believe in Hope Even When

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, November 29, 2020)

The Spirit of Hope within me greets and honors the Spirit of Hope within each of you.

This morning we begin the Advent season walking down a path of light, and each Sunday, we will walk this path on our Advent journey. The luminaries lining the aisles remind us that this is the season of light, and we will invite the lights of hope, love, joy, and peace to enter into the dimly-lit places of our lives and hearts and illuminate us with a liberating and comforting message.

In the Christian liturgical year, Advent is the season of preparation, expectation, yearning, and waiting. We wait with anticipation for the presence of wonder, to experience something beyond our present knowing, and long for something to be planted within us.

We know that the kind of Advent and Christmas we are accustomed to will not occur this year. In the significant shift of life that we are now experiencing, many people are trying to figure out how to create a season that still contains wonder and possibility. I invite us to embrace the new ways of living and let ourselves feel the anticipation and excitement of the season, opening our hearts to the hope, love, joy, and peace that will guide us into an Advent that matters. This morning we welcome the light of hope that it may illumine our hearts and lead us toward a life of courageous love and goodwill.

Singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen wrote his classic song "Badlands" while battling depression and suicidal thoughts. He struggled with his relationship with his father, who suffered from a mental illness. He speaks about how tempting it was to give up. But he didn't; he fought on, with a stubborn belief in hope. He wrote, *"I believe in the love that you gave me. I believe in the faith that can save me. I believe in hope. And I pray that someday it may raise me above these Badlands."*

It seems to me that the world has been residing in the badlands, with a wildness that is strange and out of control. In another song, Springsteen writes about "trouble in the heartland." There is little doubt that there is trouble in the heartland, not only globally but within us. There is so much uncertainty, grief, and loss. Despair, anxiety, frustration, and fear are the constant companions of many. Often, it is a huge challenge to make a decision or even to get out of bed. We have been required to learn new ways of communication and stay connected to other people. It feels at

times that we are more attached to our computers than we are to family and friends.

This troubled heartland challenges us emotionally, physically, and spiritually and it can be easy to surrender to a lack of enthusiasm and to become overwhelmed by the loss of life, the separation from family and friends, and the complete disruption of what was. All of this can make us lethargic and succumb to a diminishing sense of hope. We not only need the comforting words we heard in Isaiah, but also the encouraging words of the gospel to give us wisdom and direction for living in these challenging times.

As I read the gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent, it seemed to me that the author was not about to let the people fall into despair or complacency as they faced the devastating and debilitating circumstances of their world. Four times the early Christians are called to keep awake, to be alert, and on the watch.

The Gospel of Mark was written during (or just after) the disastrous Jewish revolt against the Roman imperial occupation in Palestine (66-70 CE). Rome's vengeance shook Mark's world to its core. The imperial armies defeated the rebellion, and they destroyed the Jewish temple, the sacred heart of the Jewish world. One could only imagine the enormity of the loss of the "sacred heart of the Jewish world."

It is in this context that the gospel writer pens powerful words to instill a sense of hope. This passage is an example of a genre of prophetic writing used by the early Christians known as apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic images can be found throughout the Bible typically including poetic and cryptic language, descriptions of threatening signs in the heavens, and natural disasters. Unique to this writing style is that anguish is always followed by victory. Apocalyptic narratives are extravagant, evocative visions of hope for situations in which all hope seemed lost.

In the reading this morning, Jesus is aware that life was to become very challenging for the disciples. He gives an apocalyptic speech and then encourages his disciples to wait and watch. In the face of calamity – keep alert, keep awake, be prepared to see the coming of the 'son of man with great power.' Jesus calls his disciples to a kind of "attentive living," to be alert to the signs of hope that would instill courage to face what would be required of them.

In this passage, the gospel writer encourages people to be attentive to signs of hope and be vigilant in their hopefulness in the wake of utter chaos. In being vigilant, their hearts would be open, and they would

understand how to persevere in a world so marred by suffering and struggle.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Harris writes, “For some reason we humans seem to learn best how to love when we are a bit broken, when our plans fall apart, when our myths of self-sufficiency and goodness and safety are shattered.” When a pandemic occurs with its ability to shatter everything that makes sense, when the economic structures of the world fail, when marriages break up, cancer strikes, illnesses cripple, and jobs are lost, these global and personal apocalyptic experiences tend to awaken us to our strength and ability to endure.

Kenneth Boa is the president of Reflections Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is engaged in a ministry of relational evangelism and discipleship. In a blog he wrote this about hope: “Throughout history, human beings have endured the loss of many things. People have lost their health, their finances, their reputations, their careers, even their loved ones, and yet have endured. The pages of history books are filled with those who suffered pain, rejection, isolation, persecution, and abuse; there have been people who faced concentration camps with unbroken spirits and unbowed heads, people who have been devastated by Job-like trials and yet found the strength to go on without cursing God and dying. Humans can survive the loss of almost anything – but not without hope.”

Even in the filth, violence, and heartbreak of a Nazi concentration camp, Swiss psychiatrist Viktor Frankl leaned into hope. He writes, “In the last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sense my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that helpless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of my existence.”

“Defiant Requiem, is a feature-length documentary film highlighting the most dramatic example of intellectual and artistic courage in the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Concentration Camp during World War II. It is the remarkable story of Rafael Schächter, a brilliant, young Czech conductor. Arrested and sent to Terezin in 1941, under the most brutal circumstances, Schachter demonstrated moral leadership. He was determined to sustain courage and hope for his fellow prisoners by enriching their souls through great music.

His most extraordinary act was to recruit 150 prisoners and teach them Verdi’s Requiem by rote. Despite grueling days of forced labor, after multiple rehearsals in a dank cellar using a single score, the Requiem was performed sixteen times for fellow prisoners. The last, most famous performance took place on June 23, 1944 before high-ranking SS officers

from Berlin to lead the International Red Cross to believe that the prisoners were treated well and flourishing.

Defiant Requiem celebrates the 70th anniversary of this last performance and is a testament to the power of hope and the power of music to instill hope. I encourage you to watch it. You can find it on Amazon Prime Video.

Michelle Obama said, “You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all the world’s problems at once, but don’t ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.”

The power of hope is no less than miraculous in its ability to pull us out of the deepest despair and darkest valley, a cord that endures even when tested and stretched and that binds us to life. Hope is active, and it affirms that no matter what we face, there is still goodness and beauty to be found in life.

Defiant Requiem is a concrete illustration of what the gospel reading is teaching. It is an example of someone being awake, aware, and attentive to the possibility of hope in a chaotic time. Schachter's hopefulness became a brilliant light of hope in the lives of others. The movie proclaims the good news, the hope that rings out when all hopes seem lost.

It seems to me that the message of Advent hope is this: when the world is falling apart around us, there is even more reason for us to be awake, to be attentive to signs of hope, and to be vigilant in our hopefulness so we can, in our own unique and individual ways, become the light of hope for others.

I encourage all of us to be watchful and alert, cultivating a mindful attentiveness to signs of hope and wonder and goodness all around. Let us never miss an opportunity to bring the good news of hope into the lives of others. This act of hope can be as simple as calling friends and neighbors to check on them, sending a Christmas card or a handwritten note to others to say you are thinking about them, encouraging and supporting one another in whatever way we are able. One small action of hope can be a starting point for healing and renewal. What will be your hopeful action this week? Whose heart can you brighten with the light of hope?

My friends, with hope in our hearts and guiding our path, we can rise above the badlands and bring peace to the troubled heartland within and around us. May be this be so for all of us.