

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Advent 1

November 29, 2020

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Mark 1: 1-15

Transformed to Hope

So many have undergone unprecedented loss this year. Family and friends have succumbed to death in this pandemic, millions have lost economic security through loss of jobs, or businesses they built over a lifetime. Most of us have lost our beloved rhythms of life that felt familiar and gave our lives the structure and security we appreciated. We have lost the richness of gatherings and adventure that comes with being with friends and family in community. And then there are the losses related to hatred and violence, the things that may have gone unnoticed that have been brought to the forefront and shattered some of our naiveté or innocence.

Throughout Advent we always proclaim hope, love, joy, and peace in the midst of difficulty. This is forever the church's gift to the world. Our faith story is grounded in the presence of God that came and dwelt among us in the midst of hardship. But this year it is needed more than I've ever known it before. There's a global search for hope in the midst of the long dark night. As we enter into this season it is important to name that sometimes hope, love, joy, and peace are distant feelings when we have encountered so much loss. The anticipation of renewed grief as Christmas Eve approaches can be difficult to bear for many. Ritual helps us move through these feelings and funnel our heartbreak in ways that, while not alleviating it totally, gives space for a tangible remembering. I think this will be especially important for us this year because we are not able to gather and ritualize our joys and our losses in the ways we might usually do.

That is why we wanted to give all of you an opportunity to bring light into your homes through luminaries or advent candles as we light them in the services we invite you to light yours also. You might want to share in the offered prayers each day of advent as you light a candle. Perhaps you want to put your luminary in the window to shine the light of hope, love, joy and peace into the dark nights in a challenging time for all the world to see. My prayer is that you will tend gently to yourself, and that you will be surprised by the way the Spirit "lights" your hearts this advent season.

It is my hope that in the years to come when this is all a story of a hindsight moment in history we will discover how we were transformed in important ways in the midst of the groaning. Right now there is only one thing that is clear, we will never be the same. Nor should we be. I know I have been preaching "hope" and "waiting" for several months now and it may seem redundant to be heading into this season of more thematic "waiting." And it might be difficult for me to convince you, that we should keep up hope and somehow find love, joy, and peace in this

difficult time but this is what keeps us alive, these are the things light the way into a life of abundance even now.

This advent we are going to hear from the prophet Isaiah every week. Isaiah writes in a time of exile and suffering for his people. Many of us have felt exiled from one another and from the rhythms of life that help us feel settled for nine months now. There are passages of scripture and carols and images that we will hear in this season that we have heard before but the meaning will be new and the truth will be something we have never seen so clearly before.

Isaiah calls out *“Raise your voice... raise it; don't be afraid!”*

The history of humanity is fraught with pain—especially the pain that comes accompanied by fear and leads to oppression and violence of people against one another. In the last months we have witnessed the dramatic presence of fear and how it sparks hate and anger and rage. Even those who are telling us not to live in fear, don't succumb to the fear of the virus, don't wear a mask don't get a vaccine, don't be afraid is hurled at us with violence, why because these people are afraid. Afraid of not being in full control of their lives and their circumstances, a fear of trusting another to have an answer. I am control of 'me' and you can't touch that. The power of 'me, I' is the power pandemic of our time.

Jesus was also born into a world of pain and fear, oppression and violence. His very life called for the transformation of every life he encountered. The opening words of an anonymous Jewish poet, “I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining,” were scrawled on a wall during the Holocaust. This theme song for our season calls us to examine our propensity for annihilating fear by annihilating each other. The power of narrative and music will call us to a different response—transformation and reconciliation through hope, love, joy, and peace. This Advent and Christmas, let us fill the night with music and light and affirm and act on the reasons why we can still “believe, even when” we are discouraged.

This is the Sunday of “hope.” Both of our scriptures this week come out of times when people needed hope for a new day. The 40th chapter of Isaiah also known as “Second Isaiah” has a much more comforting tone than the first set of chapters. It reminds me of what people have been saying about how shaming people into wearing masks just doesn't work. No matter how defiant one is, we are still deep-down scared. We are sick of the bad news but denying it doesn't make it go away. So comfort is where Isaiah goes, comfort is where we all must go. God gives us hope for tomorrow. Honestly, I have seen this almost daily in people recently, I have seen it in myself and in my friends. We don't want to be afraid, at the forefront of our minds we might not even know we are afraid but there is an extra level of anxiety, of nervousness, of fear that we are all encountering right now. In parent teacher interviews this week the teachers talked about this, how they are learning to be more gentle and patient this year because there is more going on in the lives of families and individuals than they have ever seen before. Even as I was writing this sermon I suddenly recognize that this very thing might be why my seven year old has said to me several times in the last month. “Nanay I don't know what is going on but I feel like something is wrong.” Or why she has been waking up in the night saying “I'm afraid but she can't name of

what.” How many of us are living that right now. I am seeing people that are usually calm appear unusually anxious. I see it in myself, this isn’t a judgement, it’s a truth.

Now most of us can pause and we can say but we have it so good. I expressed my sorrow of missing out on something the other day and I was lashed out at. I was reprimanded for my grief because I have it so good in life. I started to argue back, putting myself down, for I know how privileged I am and then I put my counsellor hat on for myself even (sometimes we need to hear our own inner voices) and I realized that even for me it is okay to grieve at this time, to sorrow some of what we are missing. Then I took a moment and reflected back on that persons recent Facebook posts and I realized everything she was saying right now was a fight to keep in control, so my saying I was sad, made her sad and that’s not my job, my job is to make her happy - right? Yes I have it good, many of us here do, but every one of us have faced losses this year and that is significant. So let me encourage you Speak tenderly to yourself and others, understand one another’s deep pain that comes out in strange ways that we ourselves don’t fully understand. When we begin to listen, we begin to understand, when we hear each other’s pain, we are motivated to do the right thing for each other. Marks Gospel tells us to pay attention in these moments because God is present and God is about to do a new thing here.

John the Baptist is witnessing to the transformation of lives. Making paths for new life and making way for the baptizing of the Spirit, announcing Jesus who will come out of the wilderness and offer a life we can not dream of, a life of abundance we cannot ask for or imagine. Jesus appears, the spirit appears in our stories to come the angels of God’s presence will appear offering hope, reminding us that we are never alone even in the midst of a struggling world.

John the Baptist begins the gospel of Mark telling us to keep watch because things are about to be revealed. There is so much more happening in the advent season, so much more being revealed than we usually focus on. The something for which we wait is not the birth of the baby Jesus. It is not a manger or an overcrowded inn or shepherds in search of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Nor is it the baking of Christmas cookies, or the sparkling trees or even the giving and receiving of gifts. What is about to be revealed is a whole new way of living, the transformation of lives and our world. What Jesus wants to reveal to us this advent is hope, even now, hope even in the midst of a time in which challenging seems like a word too trite. Hope is here, we are not alone.

Thanks be to God.