

Do We Plant Seeds of Hope?

Fellow bearers of the image of God – the imprint of Love, I invite us to wonder together this morning: do we plant seeds of hope? God’s love draws us together on this first Sunday in Advent – via livestream and in this house of worship on land which First Nations peoples and others have loved long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future. Let’s open this time of reflection with words of prayer.

Holy hopeful Spirit, we pray that you will help us see how you work through us to plant seed of hope in the times and spaces in which we live. Center our hearts and our minds in your peace which is deep beyond our understanding. Amen.

Fellow followers of Jesus, today we have the opportunity focus on hope. I invite us to notice both **reflective** and **active** aspects of our experiences of hope.

Merriam-Webster defines hope as *“to want something to happen or be true.”* These words evoke the **reflective** aspect of hope that is an experience of longing. It can often be a silent and solitary aspect of hope.

Oxford English Dictionary defines hope as *“a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”* These words evoke the **active** aspect of hope that is an experience of watching, waiting, anticipating. It can become a shared aspect of hope when articulated within community.

Hope is *“to want something to happen or be true”* – *“a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”*

I challenge us to see ways in which those two aspects of hope (the reflective and the active) do not oppose one another but rather interweave, dance with, compliment one another. They move in a circular motion of reflection leading to action leading to reflection.

Let's take a moment to draw a connection to our own life in regard to this cycle of reflection and action that hope requires. Many of us experienced the opportunity to be with family and friends during the Thanksgiving holiday. And many of us will have opportunity to be with family and friends during the Christmas holiday.

I wonder: with whom among your loved ones do you experience ick (meaning recurring irritation, friction, jabs, silence). Bring to mind that one person. Allow yourself to wonder both what ick they experience and what ick you experience. What are the often repeated words, facial expressions, body postures – that hurt you, that hurt them?

Now, what does Thanksgiving or Christmastime ick have to do with hope? Well, do you believe that people essentially can't or don't change... or that people essentially can and do change? It's a big question. Either belief might involve hope. Perhaps you have felt that people in your life don't really accept you as you are (your personality, what matters to you). So we long or hope for acceptance instead of pressure to change ourselves. And yet the belief that people can and do change requires hope as well. When we learn that a way that we move in the world hurts a loved one, we need to want to change and expect that we can. And we need that loved one to have faith enough in us that they will truly hope for and encourage our efforts to adapt.

I'd like to share several aspects of hope from contemporary thinkers and our ancient thinkers in scripture. Hope involves anticipation and trust.

Let's hear again just one sentence from Mr. E.B. White's March 30, 1973 letter to Mr. Nadeau: *"It is quite obvious that the human race has made a mess of life on this planet. But as a people, we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right."* May we welcome ourselves in coming times to find the seeds of goodness that we are harboring and to help create the right conditions to let them sprout.

Hope involves action. Advent is a time to focus on a kind of hope that is active and moving us toward greater life in the midst of any circumstances. My favorite words about hope come from author Barbara Kingsolver. As a teenager, I read her 1990 book *Animal Dreams*, in which she writes: *"The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."* Hope enlivens us to imagine how we will move, participate, live into what is coming next.

What do you need to sustain you in the work of hope and from where will you derive what you need during your current season of anticipation in your life? Among many possibly answers is Jesus. On this New Year Day, we start a new cycle of witnessing how Jesus arrived, lived, died and rose again in his time and place for all times and all places.

One more contemporary thinker. In October 2023, I had the opportunity to travel to Nashville to attend a conference for church musicians and worship leaders. I trusted it would be good of my spirit and my work as a worship leader. The absolute highlight of my sojourn was meeting a big-spirited musician named Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary fame. In 2007, he produced an album entitled "Just Causes."

Proceeds from sales go to justice organizations indicated alongside each track of the album – thematically. I will share the full song, “In These Times,” as a blessing in a few moments. For now, I invite us to hear the metaphor of planting in this verse:

*“In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Planting flowers in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times”*

I love how Noel invites us to focus on these times and planting. What seeds of hope can you plant in these times?

Let’s turn for some insight to our two scripture readings. Jeremiah gives us a sense of what we might long for – what we might hope for. He simply says, *“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up... And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”*

We know that we have long thought of Jesus – the Christ Child and then the leaders – as that one branch of righteousness. Yet we are all branches coming from that one branch. This past week, I gathered with clergy friends and one colleague spoke up about the four meanings of righteous.

- To be on the ethically right side of a situation
- To be made right through the work of a relationship
- To appear righteous to another
- (and this colleague’s favorite) To bring about justice – declare something as righteous and then do it)

How will you do your part in being one of the branches of righteousness?

Our Psalmist writes about how we might move and approach deeper hope: *“Teach me your paths... Lead me in your truth... According to your steadfast love remember me... God leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble God’s way...”* I feel as though the Psalmist invites us this morning to remember to be teachable – that we can lean into God (lean into that way of Love) for new teachings in this time, for new ways of leading us, for the steadfast knowledge that we are loved and remembers in God’s steadfast love as we are, and that God will lead the way.

I invite you to close your eyes now if you wish as we close with these words from Noel Paul Stookey. The song “In These Times” – invite it to wash over you, invite it to help you wonder how you will plant, how you will bring water to spaces of need, and how you will grow gardens of hope.

*“There's a warning in the wind that comes wailing through the trees
A depression in the shoreline left by the pounding seas
There is a lesson in the drought that brings a country to its knees
In these times...*

*We are dancing with disaster when we live beyond our needs
And pretend our hungry souls are not related to our greed...
Life's a journey. but it's not about the speed
In these times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Planting flowers in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times*

*As the perfect storm approaches and the gale around us roars
No longer can we close our eyes and hide behind our doors:
Our choices fewer now by what we've chosen to ignore
In these times...*

*The ship of state is drifting; it's getting hard to steer
It's a complicated issue but the direction's pretty clear
and 'each of us' is who we need to get to there from here
In these times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Bringing water to the sand
Reaching out a helping hand
In...these...times*

*In everything that's living there's a promise of a Love
Planted in the seeds below and in the stars above
We must listen to its message; become faithful stewards of
These times...*

*In these times...we must be mindful of the gift
In these times...use our hands and hearts to lift
The fallen spirit in this land
Growing gardens in the sand
Reaching out a helping hand...
In...these...times”*

Friends, let us plant, water, and grow seeds of hope. We are capable. God will work through us. Love is counting on us. Amen!

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December 1, 2024 | Advent 1
Psalm 25:1-10, Jeremiah 33:14-16