

More Light Shall Yet Dawn: Hope Amidst Uncertainty

Today is the second Sunday of Advent when we move into the darkest time of the year while anticipating the return of light on the solstice. Light lifts our spirits, gives us hope, and nurtures all of nature, hence the title of this sermon: More Light Shall Yet Dawn, which is on Northbrae's stained glass windows and web page.

This time of anticipated light is sacred time, Advent time, and for Christians the beginning of a new liturgical year when amidst sorrow we hold onto hope. Deriving from the Latin word *adventus* for "coming," Advent liturgically looks forward to the incarnation of the divine, the Light of the World, in the person of Jesus.

With one of today's readings we heard the Prophet Isaiah foretelling the arrival of a messiah, calling us in whatever wilderness we may find ourselves to prepare for a time when "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."ⁱ A poignant passage perhaps for those of us who live in the land of earthquakes and fires, a time of COVID, and a climate of both political uncertainty and hope.

Hope, a partner of faith, often springs forth in times of loss, grief, and uncertainty. And clearly that is where we are with sheltering in place, lockdown again tomorrow, a vaccine on the horizon, and a new administration stepping up in just over six weeks to lead our country.

Cycles of Death and Rebirth

Being in the midst of such uncertainty is uncomfortable. However, if we allow ourselves to open to the wisdom embedded in such times of unknowing, we will see that these times are often at the heart of movement and change which are the soil for new growth.

We have heard from our Buddhist friends "all is *dukkha*." Literally, *dukkha* means "suffering" but the feeling of *dukkha* is more akin to impermanence which is central to the Buddhist path to nirvana, enlightenment. *Dukkha* ... all is impermanence ... nothing lasts.

As the seasons turn, we see this to be true. Each year we may marvel at the beauty of flowers in the spring; the taste, smell, and vibrant colors of fresh carrots, tomatoes, and strawberries in the summer; the spectrum of yellows, oranges, and reds in the fall. But is part of their vibrant beauty, their impermanence?

Two weeks ago, I marveled at the brilliance of my daughter's red Japanese maple. I wanted to hold onto this beauty. And then one week ago, its leaves were strewn around its trunk leaving a shimmering red carpet while above its branches were almost bare. Looking up to find the tiny exposed humming bird nest built last spring, I wondered if that bird or her offspring will return next spring? It's hard to embrace these cycles of birth, death, rebirth, and growth but it's precisely in the seeds of these cycles that hope germinates.

Having spent time with farmers in the Midwest, I know their lives also cycle with the seasons: plow, plant, harvest, take a break when both the farmers and fields rest, and then as winter unfolds anticipate a new growing season amidst hope and many questions: Will there be another drought, will the rains come, will it rain too much and flood the fields, will spring planting be on time or delayed?

This is liminal space for them in between seasons when they hold onto hope while they plan, plow deep snow, endure the mud season, then begin again to clear away thorns, dig out rocks, and loosen the soil so that the seeds after a time of dormancy can once again sprout. Hope in the midst of winter darkness and spring thaw; hope and visions of something new arising.

Hope in 1st Century Palestine

Hope, too, was arising 2000 years ago in Palestine. Musing on winter's seasonal darkness and hope hidden in times of change, metaphorically resonates with much more dramatic images of 1st century Palestine when Herod Antipas, Roman Rule, and local administrators were maintaining oppression, fear, hierarchy, and patriarchal privilege. It's an understatement to say that these times were also filled with extreme uncertainty, but still many felt compelled to push forward. On one hand, Zealots engaged in rebellious attacks while, on the other, a baby called Jesus was soon to be born, destined to become a Man of God who would speak of peace, love, and welcoming the stranger. The hope for a Messiah was alive.

Were we back in the first century, this might have been the time when we, along with Joseph and his betrothed, Mary, set off for Bethlehem to be registered. This was the first census to be taken in the Roman province of Syria, which included Galilee and Judea.ⁱⁱ Such a trip could have felt like a burden but imagine if all of the young DACA people today, who have already offered so much to our country, were to be invited to go to the capital of the state where they lived to be registered as citizens. Imagine this! Could this have been what Joseph and Mary felt as they set off from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea?

According to Google Maps, were one to take this journey today, it would take a walker 33 hours. Now imagine 2000 years ago when, even with Roman roads, Mary and Joseph would

have taken country routes when she was almost 9 months pregnant. For them, this was a pilgrimage at the end of which was the imminent birth of their first born child they knew not where. Nor did they have any inkling of shepherds in the field caring for their sheep, angels preparing to make a momentous announcement, magi already traveling from Persia. Whether these stories are factual, they express considerable truth not only in the wonder of yet another incarnation of creation's bounty, but the obedience of 1st century folk to Roman rule while trusting in the god of their knowing - and holding on to hope. For them it was a time of uncertainty just as it is for us now nationally and, yes, at Northbrae as well as we move towards the new year. In the midst of impermanence and uncertainty, we want to know how all will unfold.

Impermanence:

But perhaps it is not possible. All we have is where we are, right now, in the present.

As we heard in the reading from the Tao Te Ching, "If we realize that all things change, there is nothing we will try to hold onto...Trying to control the future is like trying to take the master carpenter's place."

Carolyn captured this feeling last week when she said, "To be born is to make a pact with dying."

At the heart of such wisdom is an intuitive acceptance and appreciation of the impermanent nature of everything.

With the birth and death of plants, animals, and those we love, we have infinite examples of such evolution and reincarnation. Mary Oliver reminds us that "one of the laws of the universe is that if something is not unfolding, it is dying. If it is not sprouting new directions, it is decaying."ⁱⁱⁱ This is the compost for future growth just as fallen redwoods feed the young trees arising.

In hiking through the Hoh Rain Forest of the Olympic Peninsula a couple of years ago, we saw - with wonder - nurse trees, those fallen trees upon whose trunks young trees grow. Grow so strong that when the older tree disappears, the new one's roots are strong enough to stand on their own. In this way, the rain forest is constantly evolving in the midst of change.

Daring to Hope

"Change comes inevitably and unavoidably, with or without our invitation; every living moment, with every breath, every step, and every heartbeat we are changing. So, the question

is not, “*Will* we change?” but, “*HOW* will we change”, “*WHEN* will we change”, “*WHY* will we change?”^{iv} “For something new to emerge within us, we must be open to change.”^v This is at the heart of strong, vibrant evolution.

Northbrae’s future continues to evolve, especially now as it prepares to let its ministers step down while the community steps up in a time of transition to be led by a strong Worship Team, Care Team, and Council. This is where we see hope arising in this midst of uncertainty. Some comfortable rituals may stay the same while some may drift away creating space for others to come with exciting newness.

Doesn’t this have a familiar ring as we return to the story of Mary and Joseph searching for a place for her to deliver her first born son? Did they have faith in the midst of considerable uncertainty about where shelter would be found? I like to think they did. They had no idea of what the future held for them nor can we be sure. But they held onto faith and hope and we can do the same, knowing that throughout times of change Northbrae has remained firmly situated on the solid ground of loyalty and a long, strong history.

Firm Foundation

As a relative newcomer to Northbrae, I have seen that the church has a glorious track record of conviction and continual re-imagination grounded in hope and courage. Each time in letting go of a strongly held identity, a new vision has emerged. It was once Presbyterian but then had the courage to become non-denominational, welcoming spiritual seekers from many paths while remaining true to its non-dogmatic Christian roots. It once held services in Haver Hall and then, again with courage, it built a beautiful sanctuary with stained glass windows that lift my heart each time I enter. It became aware of upon whose land it was planted and in honor of the local indigenous people created the Sacred Hope Garden. With each change, Northbrae has planted new roots supported by aging yet still strong ones. So far every replanting seems to have been good.

In coming to understand Northbrae’s history, I have seen it stepping into the truth of Reinhold Neibuhr’s advice to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.^{vi} I believe Northbrae is perfectly situated to be a nurse tree serving as a foundation for what may be evolving.

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As a child, I often heard the story of how the horse and carriage barn at the end of my great aunt’s property had burned down. This was, of course, a tremendous loss to the family but for me, who had never known this barn, it was the foundation that I loved. I would go over to my

aunt's house and down to the foundation where repeatedly with delight I might find a box of crayons, a shattered blue willow cup and saucer, and once an almost whole blue tea pot. My friend and I created for ourselves a tea party, supported by the whispered stories of times gone by, being kept alive and reimagined by us.

In Between Doorways

Stories remain, offering us solid ground and identity even in the midst of impermanence and uncertainty, when sometimes we need to close one door before a new one can open.

It is natural, when we stand between a closed door and one not yet opened, to want to cling to what we've known. The poet, Anne Hillman offers us a different perspective on what may await. She says,

We look with uncertainty
beyond the old choices for
clear-cut answers
to a softer, more permeable aliveness
which is every moment
at the brink of death;
for something new is being born in us
if we but let it.
We stand at a new doorway,
awaiting that which comes...^{vii}

Liminal Space: Threshold of Hope

In standing in between doorways, we are in liminal time and space just as farmers are in winter when they imagine new plantings. Liminal space is the "crossing over" place where we have left something behind, yet we are not yet fully in something else. We are on a threshold, which is the original meaning of the Latin word *limen* from which the word "liminal" derives.

John O'Donohue talks of what it takes for us to cross a threshold. We are afraid of the unknown because it lies outside our vision and control. And yet, just as we see change in nature arriving when the season ripens, so too our time for change will come. O'Donohue acknowledges that we may resist change, holding instead to continue what we have known, while asking, "At which threshold am I now standing? What is preventing me from crossing over? What gift would enable me to do it?" This liminal time along with our questions opens space for hope. As Advent prepares us for a new incarnation and as spring's blooming begins deep underground in

the heart of winter, change awaits us when the time is ripe. Crossing such a threshold amidst uncertainty, yet full of hope, is like starting off on a pilgrimage.^{viii}

Northbrae's Pilgrimage

In ancient times, and again today, pilgrimages were and are both symbolic and actual journeys towards renewal. By definition, they are also journeys into unknown territory, leaving the familiar so that you might be alive to what you'd never imagined. In starting out, you think you know the destination but actually it is the journey itself which you often discover holds the answer.

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Have you ever come across, on a walk in the woods, a staircase covered with moss and hidden by overgrown brambles? Have these stairs beckoned to you even if you have not known where they might lead? As a child, I found one of these right behind the foundation I have already mentioned. I took one step at a time down the hill into a wetlands below. Descending that hill was one of my childhood pilgrimages on the way to a distant stream. But for me, it turn out that it was the exploration itself that mattered.

I see Northbrae at the edge of such a journey. And what is beckoning is very real and alive: congregation led services, a new minister on the horizon, a new vision statement setting the course for the next five years.

Heller Keller said, "A bend in the road is not the end of the road...unless you fail to make the turn."^x

Northbrae is making this turn with hope, creativity, vision, and faith. All of these are wonderful old-fashioned values that remain true. They are values that sustained one of our favorite still remembered mentors, Merle Davis, who believed these old-fashioned values to be "faith as a quality of living that helps us find meaning in the universe and in our own lives, and hope that enables us to face whatever is before us with conviction."^x

In closing let me share an Advent blessing offered by Jan Richardson, a United Methodist Minister who blesses those holding onto hope in times of uncertainty. She says,

It is difficult to see it from here,
I know
but trust me when I say
this blessing is inscribed on the horizon.
Is written on

that far point
you can hardly see.
Is etched into
a landscape
whose contours you cannot know
from here.
All you know
is that it calls to you,
draws you,
pulls you toward
What you have perceived
only in pieces ...
[Yet] as you draw near,
the blessing embedded in the horizon
begins to blossom.^{xi}

ⁱ *Isaiah*: 2: 3-4.

ⁱⁱ See the study notes for Luke 2:5 in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 1958. Note that Acts 5:37 refers to a census in Judea in 6-7 C.E.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Oliver quoted by John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggles for New Beginnings* (Woodstock, VT: Christian Journeys, 2014), 48.

^{iv} Jhos Singer, "The Black Moon of Beginning," October 09, 2016.

^v Frank Ostasecki, *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us about Living Full* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017), 10.

^{vi} Reinhold Niebuhr, "Serenity Prayer," www.ehcounseling.com.

^{vii} Anne Hillman, "We Look With Uncertainty," <https://gratefulness.org/resource/we-look-with-uncertainty/>

^{viii} John O'Donohue, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle with New Beginnings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 48.

^{ix} <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes>

^x Merle Updike Davis, *Ties Across Time: A Woman's Life in Social Work* (Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company, 2002), 137.

^{xi} Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 32-33.

Scriptures read on December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40: 3-4

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of

David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Tao Te Ching (translated by Stephen Mitchell)

If you realize that all things change,
there is nothing you will try to hold onto.
If you aren't afraid of dying,
there is nothing you can't achieve.

Trying to control the future
is like trying to take the master carpenter's place.
When you handle the master carpenter's tools,
chances are that you'll cut yourself.