

Today begins advent, as you know. The season that holds so much meaning for us. The season that is busy and full. Full of excitement, full of traditions, full of things to do, gifts to buy, food to prepare, houses to decorate. Living with children, the season adds a little bit of magic for the excitement to see the tree go up and the anticipation of new toys.

This advent season, I get to try something new. As some of you know, I have been exploring my calling to serve in the church. As I did last winter, and will again in the new year, I am furthering my education by taking seminary classes. I have begun meeting with a mentor set up by the conference and I have been participating in the advisory board meetings. This advent, I have been given the reigns, so to speak, to pick the themes and orchestrate the services for the next few weeks. I am learning of some of the many details that get arranged beyond just the preparation for the sermon. So allow me a little grace if all my ducks aren't in a row, because I don't even know how many ducks there are supposed to be.

Each week of Advent we will look at a different theme: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. And follow the suggested lectionary texts.

Sometimes those words get used so much over the Christmas season, that they lose their meaning. They become just a card sitting on our shelf, or a decoration or banner in our busily decorated homes. My hope or plan for this advent is that we look at each of those words as a verb rather than as a noun.

Hope as an action to bring about a better future, rather than a feeling of optimism.

Peace as an activity to right our relations with each other, rather than a feeling of tranquility and stillness.

Joy as a celebration of the justice in our world, rather than a feeling of happiness.

And Love as a genuine act of care, compassion and tenderness towards one another, rather than just being nice.

Today I will begin with HOPE.

Hope (Wikipedia) is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large.

Hope can often be thought of as naivety. Children can be eternally hopeful because they don't know what kind of big bad world is out there. Hope is not just the ability to see the glass half full, that's optimism.

So, what's the difference?

I had to look up "the difference between hope and optimism."

At first, they look very much the same, they get used interchangeably.

Optimism is one's core belief that your future will have good, positive experiences, and won't have bad, negative ones. Optimists believe that positive things are more likely to happen than negative things. An optimistic disposition is important and can affect many parts of our life, like relationships, our work life, our health and even our finances.

Hope is a little different according to Physiologist C. R. Snyder, one of the central figures in hope research. Hope is defined as a positive motivational state that allows us to believe in a successful outcome based on action.ⁱ This researcher, says that hopeful people are able to come up with lots of different ways in which they can successfully reach a chosen goal; and that hopeful people are able to initiate and then continue on with the actions that are needed to advance towards those goals.

High hope individuals do not react in the same way to barriers as low hope individuals, instead hopeful people view barriers as challenges to overcome and are able plan an alternative route to their goals.ⁱⁱ

I find that with hope and optimism pulled apart from each other like this, it is obvious to see how hope is not a passive word. It is active. It is not wishful thinking. Hope is to have a goal and a plan to get you there.

For example, Optimism can help me to believe that people will come to my farmers market, but hope allows me to believe in my business plan because if I do A B and/or C, I will make my goals.

The author who compiled this research concluded in the end: “It seems clear that to be optimistic in a general way about our lives will serve us well, mentally and physically. But when the chips are down, and when we need a powerful shot of motivation to help us find new ways to reach our goal and push us forward towards its achievement, there is no substitute for hope.”

In advent we talk about hope. So what are we to hope for as a follower of Christ?

Take a look at the scriptures for the first advent. Every 3 years we see these same scripture passages used for Advent. The passage from Luke is situated in a longer apocalyptic discourse in which Jesus warns of coming persecutions and foretells the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. To me it sounds more like it should be found in Revelations than in the gospels. (I like parables...)

Judgment, terrors, cosmic signs of the end times. This might seem like a strange way to begin the season of Advent. After all, isn't Advent is a time to prepare our hearts in joyful anticipation of Christ's birth?

Starting the season of Advent by reading about the powerful, lethal, destructive “signs” contrast the other “signs” we will read in the birth story, the poor peaceful innocent baby Jesus. Power and glory on the one hand, humility and helplessness on the other. A warning that the “nations” will be “distressed” and “anxious”, set alongside a message of “good news of great joy for all the people”.

It is full of paradox, full of both\and thinking rather than and\or thinking. (Like the saying “you are either with us or against us”.

Both\and thinking is that Jesus is both infant *and* Saviour. He teaches (ch 17) “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.”

Jesus' crucifixion led *both* to death *and* to new life.

Jesus was *both* fully God *and* fully human.

What Luke 21 is telling us is that in the midst of all this destruction and suffering there is Jesus, like spring buds on a tree.

Same with the text from Jeremiah. Here Jeremiah is in prison, serving out his sentence during a foreign invasion warning Judah that things were going to get worse before they get better. But there is hope; a branch in the line of David will spring forth. Bringing righteousness and justice. That hope is Jesus.

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That's the exegetical take on hope, but as I studied this text, I needed to see it in more practical terms. What should hope look like today, for us? What kind of hope is Jesus offering?

Jesus's hope is not just to make us feel nice. Jesus's hope helps us to look into the future and see positive outcomes and gives us the pathway to achieve it.

A quick glance at the news today, and all one can see is gloom, devastating fires, never ending war in the middle east, political leaders that breed fear, racism and hatred, millions of displaced people in all corners of the world, environmental collapse of species and habitat. We have mucked things up pretty bad around here. Even the most optimistic people can get sucked into the hopelessness of the future of our planet.

But I found a message of hope. In a TED-talk. For those who aren't familiar with TED-talks, they are a brief motivational speech (max 20 minutes), under the slogan "ideas worth spreading." They include titles like "100 solutions to climate change" and "how great leaders inspire action" and "the surprising science of happiness". They became very popular in the early 2000's and their videos about business, technology, culture and society. There literally are thousands of videos on-line, in hundreds of languages, presented by all types of people from youth, to Nobel prize winners, to the Pope.

And it's the TED-talk by the Pope, His holiness Pope Francis, that caught my interest.

Pope Francis believes that our problems stem from the fact that we've become separated from each other, mistrustful of those who are different from us, uncaring and contemptuous of those we view as beneath us, and too focused on our individual lives.

He talks about that "we have become a "culture of waste" -which doesn't concern only food or goods, but first and foremost, the people who are cast aside by our techno-economic systems, which without even realizing it, are now putting products at their core, instead of people."

"It would be good if the growth of technology and science could be matched by a growth in more equality and social inclusion," Pope Francis says. "How wonderful would it be if 'solidarity,' this beautiful and, at times, inconvenient word, were not simply reduced to social work, and became, instead, the default attitude in political, economic, and scientific choices, as well as in the relationships among individuals, peoples, and countries?"

"In order to do good, we need memory, we need courage, we need creativity."

To do good "we must remember that the other is not a statistic or a number. The other has a face."

He goes on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. The story of the Good Samaritan is the story of humanity. "Peoples paths are riddled with struggles, as everything is centred around money and things, instead of people. And often there is this habit, by people who call themselves "respectable", of not taking care of the others, thus leaving behind thousands of human beings, or entire populations on the side of the road." Who have we left on the side of the road?

"Fortunately, there are those who are creating a new world by taking care of the other, even out of their own pockets. Mother Teresa said "One cannot love, unless it is at their own expense"."ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes it's hard to feel a connection with those who are different from us, those who have different beliefs or hold opposing political views. Sometimes it's hard for us to see how our actions have an effect beyond ourselves.

How our actions affect

- our neighbour in Bangladesh who makes our clothes,
- our neighbour in Mexico who grows our food,
- our political representation at global summits
- our new immigrant neighbours and whether they feel welcome or not
- our natural neighbours, the bee, the caribou, the fish

We feel so small in the face of the huge problems looming in front of us.

We get scared into inaction, overwhelmed by the problem, focused on what makes us different, rather than what we have in common.

The HOPE OF CHRIST, allows us to believe that Christ has the answers to the problems of this world. The teachings of Christ are the answer that the world needs. Christ is the hope that can lead us into the future with strong and confident expectation that there is a future for this broken world.

Biblical Hope does not ignore the human tragedy or the environmental tragedy of this world, Biblical Hope looks at the future with optimism, that God is in control and we are a part of that plan of success. "Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that, with time, will develop into a large tree. It is like some invisible yeast that allows the whole dough to grow."

I can't change great world events like war, or famine or bring back a species from the endangered list. But there are small steps I can take to stand in solidarity with those who are different from me.

Pope Francis says a single individual is enough for hope to exist. A tiny flicker of light that hope feeds on, is enough to shatter the darkness. And that individual can be you, and you and me.

You and you and you together make "us". Hope does not begin with "us", it begins with a "you".

When there is an "us" there begins a revolution.

The first thing we must do is treat each other with humble tenderness, like the Good Samaritan, like Christ himself. Treat each person with compassion, and not just those that are here, or those that hang on our walls in our homes, or those we cross paths with in town, but as if all people are part of our community. These actions are what hope feeds on.

These actions then can grow, as we widen our community to include more and more people in farther and farther places from our own.

You can begin by talking with someone at the rink who seems lonely, by buying a snack for a homeless person, by buying less or spending a little more to purchase something made without harm to others.

You can act out Christ's hope by giving money and friendship to refugees, or volunteer to help a struggling kid with friendship or school work.

You can act out Christ's hope by standing in solidarity with those without power and influence, by visiting someone in prison or at a shelter, by visiting a reserve or attending a powwow, sharing a coffee with a new immigrant.

You can act out Christ's hope by installing solar panels, growing a garden, driving your car less or traveling less often by air.

These actions of hope show that we are not afraid of our future. Christ has showed us how to live and how to love, and with that knowledge we can know that we each have the power to change one person's life for the better. And that can add up and multiply into great change.

If I made you, I'm sure you could each come up with at least 10 more examples of how you can live out Christ's hope in your everyday life. Talk about this on the way home from church or over lunch. Growing up my parents often made us talk about what we heard of the sermon on the way home from church. That way hopefully, it didn't all go in one ear and out the other, but maybe one little gem stuck somewhere in between our ears.

Advent reminds us of the hope that a little humble baby brought to the world. Let us not be discouraged with the broken world we see around us, but do our small (or large) part to in bringing God's hope to a suffering world, to recognizing the other as a "you" and ourselves as a part of an "us".

To close I want to share with you a story I heard on The Moth (a podcast of true stories told live -known to make you cry on your commute home) of one woman who did just one small thing.^{iv}

Denise Scheuermann worked as a lab tech in a hospital. For a few years she worked closely with patients that we undergoing Invitro-fertilization. Each box that she shipped out of blood tests or other such things, she held momentarily and said to herself “something really good will come of this.”

And she wasn’t just optimistic, but she was hopeful. She poured out endless energy into caring for her patients, and easing their fears and concerns. She was humble and compassionate. A few years later she was transferred to another department, and at the same time her husband passed away. She became depressed and lost hope. She joined a bereavement support group and at one of these meetings she broke down. “I want to be part of taking care of patients. I miss feeling like my job matters to someone. I just feel like I don’t even belong in the health care system anymore.”

And then the woman next to her turned to her and said “Are you Denise from the lab? And she said “you helped me and my husband so much. The day that I met you, I called my husband and told him that even though this mailing the blood out every month thing sounds scary, I think this is something we can do because I have the most wonderfully caring person.” She said she now had a young son, who literally, truthfully wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for her.

And this was on the darkest day of her life, she says. She said that she said her little mantra “Something good will happen” was for the patients -a pregnancy or an adoption “but I had no idea that it would mean they would show up as an angel helping me through my darkest day. She says I learned a lot about putting that kind of hope out there and still pretty much every day of my life I think to myself “something good will come from this.”

Denise lived out her hope; the hope she had for the future of her patients. She didn't do something grandiose. But she did treat the other with compassion and tenderness, and passed on to them the hope that she had.

Christ's hope, that we are reminded of at Christmas, allows us to live into the future with confidence, that with Christ guiding our way something good can happen.

ⁱ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-science-behind-behavior/201702/whats-the-difference-between-optimism-and-hope>

ⁱⁱ <http://positivepsychology.org.uk/hope-theory-snyder-adult-scale/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone#t-661170

^{iv} <https://themoth.org/stories/something-good>