

Rabbi Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight*, says that as a Jew he is impressed in reading Matthew's account of the nativity by how utterly passive the actors are. As a Jew, he answers to the story of the Exodus, a story of how God liberated the chosen people through the enlistment and prodding of people like Moses, Aaron and Miriam. But the Christmas story implies that what God wants to do for us is so strange, so beyond the bounds of human effort and striving, that God must resort to utterly unnatural, supernatural means.

The hope that God brings is a hope that only God can bring.

My friends where is your Nevertheless? That is, where are you looking for hope? Maybe the darkness and despair described by Isaiah describes you. Whether it is grief, disappointment or just the endless days of apathy and routine you have arrived at a place where hope is not a part of your vocabulary.

Maybe it is because we have been looking in the wrong places. Just like the people of Judah they looked to each other, but only found others in distress. They looked to their government and leaders, but were disappointed. The more they looked around the deeper the darkness. Yet, into that darkness God sends hope. That hope is Jesus.

This ultimately is a passage about Jesus. Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given. God sent Jesus to us. Jesus ultimately is our hope our only hope. Hebrews describes Jesus as our hope who is an anchor for our souls.

I don't know the darkness you might feel today. It might be heaviness. It might feel like you are enveloped in it. You might describe it as carrying you away. Here is the good news of Christmas. God sent Jesus to you. God sent Jesus so that where there is darkness there will be light. God sent Jesus so that where there is despair there would be joy. God sent Jesus so that you and I would have hope.

Unto us.... a child is born. In this one phase hope comes alive.



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ADVENT 2014

Unto Us A Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:1-7

TRINITY PULPIT

This week has been a rollercoaster of emotions. We have just finished our annual moments at a table with friends and family giving thanks, and it is right to do. We are told we are to be thankful in all things. So, no matter the events of the year, we are to give thanks.

A recent Facebook post from a friend of mine reminds us that we are to give thanks in all things. This past year Pastor John Povolitz had lost his father, made a move that he thought was God's will, only to lose his job. He found himself this Thanksgiving in a new city without much support. It was as if we're alone and he wondered if he could give thanks after such a year. In his blog "Stuff that Needs to Be Said" he writes:

I am grateful for my grief over my father.

They say that grief is the tax on loving people, and my acute, lingering pain has reminded me daily of the deep love we shared, and of the beautiful gift of his life. Every tear and every bad moment and every breakdown has been like a visit from my father; a brushing-up against him, where the distance between us seems almost nonexistent. The tears are a tribute. **I am grateful that we were brave enough to leave comfort.** I'm so proud of my family for letting go of something really great to reach out for something unknown. Even if it brought with it some really lousy, hurtful stuff, we did it with a spirit of adventure, and a trust in one another, and a faith in God. The decision confirmed for me, that regardless of the place you arrive; courage is always a road worth taking. **I am grateful that I was disliked.** I remember being told quite matter-of-factly by someone I trusted and believed in at our new home, that I "didn't fit-in". Though it stung sharply, it caused me to look in the mirror at who I really was, and decide whether I was willing to compromise that truth, or to be who God was calling me to be as a man and a pastor. I found out that it is far better to be disliked for whom you are,

than loved for who you are not. Integrity is indeed the softest pillow. If you can rest in your efforts and your motives and your honesty, that's a blessed place to land. **I am grateful that I was fired.** It's an incredibly painful thing to be told you're not wanted; that despite your best and most sincere offering, and regardless of all the sacrifice and service you've expended, that your presence isn't valued. But for me, in that rejection was a release; the un-tethering of something important that had been grounded. Being "let go", was actually being cut loose. I remember the day not long ago when my wife said, "Getting fired was the greatest thing that ever happened to you". I didn't have to ask how that was so. I knew. **I am grateful that my family felt alone and scared.** There were many days when it felt like just the four of us against the world, and though it isn't a way I'd like to live for very long at all, I realized just how strong we are together, and how much real love is a shield against the slings and arrows that come at you as you move through this place. If all you have is one or two people who love you in this life, that's still a really great deal. **I am grateful for the days when we had no idea what to do.** They say that a tree grows the most in winter, as its roots dig down into the earth for sustenance and stability. The death of my father, and the loss of the dream, and the tossing-out of the plan, reminded me how little we really control, and how much faith really is worth. I learned in a profound way, just what it means to walk by that faith alone, and not by what your eyes or mind can make sense of. **I am grateful for the low places and the dark nights of the soul.** My faith in God is different now than it was a year ago. I can't describe exactly how, but it's richer, it's deeper, and it's more real, even where it's less clear or defined. I've learned to trust in the goodness of God even when things don't seem very good, and in doing the right thing relentlessly, even when right is not always done to you.

He concluded it is important to give thanks in the bad times and thus to cultivate gratitude. I

think he is right that giving thanks in the difficult time not only cultivates gratitude, but it also cultivates hope.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and today we turn our attention to hope. We have lived this week in the rollercoaster of emotion of Thanksgiving and unrest in our nation. This week people have been disappointed, angry, disturbed and scared. As we have witnessed protests around our nation some have been encouraged and others frustrated. In moments like these there is a tendency to choose sides but as God's people we must, not so to the fray. We must thoughtfully and prayerfully respond to each other, and to our culture in a way that brings peace and shows compassion for every side of this difficult time.

As I recently said, if we are going to choose sides let us choose God's side. Let us choose compassion, forgiveness, and love of neighbor, and I would add today let us choose hope.

Our text today is the promise of hope in Jesus Christ. Isaiah writes a word of hope to his own generation, but this word of hope would be fulfilled in the coming of Christ to us. Jesus would be the promise of the one who would restore David's Kingdom and whose kingdom there would be no end. This word of hope from Isaiah is a word of hope for all time.

It was written in a dark period for God's people. Previous to this chapter, we get a different view of life from Isaiah. The setting is dark days for Judah. The people of Judah were trapped in what was a no win situation politically. They were being pulled in both directions in regards to a larger geopolitical conflict. Israel and Syria were offering their protection through and alliance. However, the Assyrians were also offering help against the Syrians and Israel. King Ahaz who had "done wrong in the eyes of the Lord" would not listen to Isaiah and others. He would make an alliance with Assyria, which would lead to Judah's downfall. Isaiah is warning King Ahaz not to make this alliance in Chapter 8. Isaiah does not want him to rely on any political solution, but to rely on God. However, Ahaz does not listen. Chapter 8 ends with a dark picture.

In chapter 8:21-22, it speaks of darkness that is all encompassing. In this passage there are three different words for darkness. Isaiah describes the desperate scene. They will be distressed and hungry and roam the land. When they become famished they will look upward and they will curse not only their government, but they will curse God as well. They will look around and all they will see is distress and darkness and utter gloom. They will be thrust into utter darkness.

Here is what Isaiah is saying. There would come a time of such utter despair that the people would not trust their government, but curse it. They would come to such a place they would not trust God, but curse God. They would be over come by a darkness that was so deep that hope would be gone. The three words that are used for darkness paint their picture of despair.

The darkness of distress is a heavy oppression. Life would seem like a heavy oppression. The weight of the world would be on them. There would just be a sense of a heavy despair about life. The second word for darkness means to be enveloped in darkness. It is the type of despair where the world is closing in and there seems to be no way out. It is a deeper despair than the just a heaviness of spirit. The final picture is a darkness that sweeps you away. The term thrust into utter darkness is the word picture of a coming storm that is sweeping across the terrain, and there is no escaping it. You are caught up in it and the darkness sweeps you away.

There are many of us who are here today who might be able to identify with one or all of these descriptions in Isaiah. Here is what is important in this text and that is this is a corporate experience. It is true that as individuals we experience these times of darkness, but Isaiah is speaking of a national experience. In our nation there are moments where there seems to be a heaviness of despair. There are moments when we throw our hands up in the air and say there does not seem to be an answer. There are times, like we have witnessed this week, that sweeps our nation away in distress and conflict.

Where is hope in such moments? Is there hope for us? In the midst of Judah's darkness and despair of Chapter 8 it begins with a word of hope and that word is "nevertheless." Nevertheless is the transition word. It is the word of hope in the midst of the despair. Nevertheless is the word of faith in a faithless situation. Nevertheless is a word of certainty in a moment of uncertainty. Nevertheless is a word of resolve in the most difficult moment.

Isaiah continues with this word of hope. There will be no more gloom or distress. Those who have enveloped by darkness and those who have been living with that heaviness of distress will suddenly find hope. Isaiah continues those who are walking in darkness a great light will shine. Those who have been in the shadow of death a light will dawn. It is as just in a moment when you don't expect it hope will emerge. Just like the dawn. At first there is no light and then in a moment that is hard to determine and describe there is light.

Isaiah goes on to describe this hope. First, it is a hope that brings with it joy. The joy of having darkness lifted

in your life is a joy that is hard to describe. If you have ever gone from despair to hope you know this feeling. What a joy it is when you can wake up not dreading the day. What a joy it is when you begin to believe again you have a future. What a joy it can be when you can laugh again. The hope that Jesus brings ushers into our lives joy.

The joy that accompanies hope is described in two ways in our text. First, it is described as a joy that is like those who have waited for a harvest. To wait for the harvest of a crop is to wait for due time. It is to wait with anticipation. It is to wait having faith in the process. To wait on a harvest means you cannot get overwhelmed in a day. One day does not a harvest make or destroy. To wait on a harvest is to keep days in perspective. Thus, when you come to the harvest there is great sense of joy and all the days become days that were part of the process. The hope that God brings to our lives brings a sense of joy. Like those who have waited for a harvest.

It is like those who are rejoicing that war is over. The picture here is of those who are burning as fuel the instruments and trappings of war. War is also a situation where there can be extreme darkness, doubt and it can seem like it will never end, but when war does end... there is a moment of knowing it is over. The picture here is when one knows the war is really over. It was a custom to burn the garments of war as a sign of something new. It was a preparation for something new in the nation.

The hope that God offers is a hope that ushers joy.

The hope that God offers is personal. Notice the personal language in this passage. Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given. This is a personal word to God's people. God is going to send a child, a son to us. All of those are personal terms. They are terms of intimate love. Later in the passage we get the picture of this child and son who will become King, but that is not how the language begins. It begins with intimacy. The promise begins with terms we all understand. A child, a son, and us are the terms of this hope in God.

In a world where Judah felt insignificant and like a pawn

in a much larger scheme, this is God's ways of reminding them they are important. They are God's people and they belong to God. God has not forgotten them, nor even in their poor choices have they exhausted God's love and grace. The word of hope is personal.

There are moments for you and me when we wonder if God hears our prayers. We wonder if God notices us at all. We wonder if we are not just being pushed back and forth by powers greater than us and we begin to doubt that God is concerned for us. To this type of doubt and despair the prophet's words bring comfort. Unto us... a

child is born. Unto us... a son is given. God's hope is personal. We are not overlooked or forgotten.

God's word of hope is based on God's power. This hope is based on God's character and ability to achieve it. The son is described as Wonderful Counselor. Meaning one who is out of the ordinary who will offer direction to His people. He is the Mighty God. He is the Everlasting Father. Meaning this is not simply another leader, but God Himself will come. He is the Prince of Peace. In a nation that was always caught in a time of conflict and war, the promised one would bring peace.

The passage ends with this thought. His Kingdom will not end and it will be accomplished by the will of God. The passage ends by saying that the hope we have is based on God's character and ability to bring to us hope. In essence, Isaiah is saying the only one who can give us true hope is God. This is something that God and only God can do for us.

In a sermon on this text, Will Willimon comments on how Christmas is the story of God doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

He writes:

And then it hit me. It was the middle of December, late in Advent. In less than two weeks I would be standing in front of the congregation reading the nativity story from one of the Gospels, demonstrating through a strange story of a virgin birth to a peasant couple in Judea that the solution to what ails us has very little to do with us. After having tried for generations to cure what ails us, God reached for something strange, radical and inconceivable. God put on our back doorstep a solution so radical that many missed it.

THERE ARE MOMENTS FOR YOU AND ME WHEN WE WONDER IF GOD HEARS OUR PRAYERS. WE WONDER IF GOD NOTICES US AT ALL. WE WONDER IF WE ARE NOT JUST BEING PUSHED BACK AND FORTH BY POWERS GREATER THAN US AND WE BEGIN TO DOUBT THAT GOD IS CONCERNED FOR US. TO THIS TYPE OF DOUBT AND DESPAIR THE PROPHET'S WORDS BRING COMFORT. UNTO US... A CHILD IS BORN. UNTO US... A SON IS GIVEN. GOD'S HOPE IS PERSONAL. WE ARE NOT OVERLOOKED OR FORGOTTEN.