

HOPE AGAINST ALL ODDS

Matthew 3:1-12

We live in times when we are surrounded by pain that it is hard to even think about anything hopeful. Many times I feel like “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.” “I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there’s gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. At breakfast Anthony found a Corvette Sting Ray car kit in his breakfast cereal box and Nick found a Junior Undercover Agent code ring in this breakfast cereal box but in my breakfast cereal box all I found was breakfast cereal. I think I’ll move to Australia. In the car pool Mrs. Gibson let Becky have a seat by the window. Audrey and Elliot got seats by the window too. I said I was being scrunched. I said I was being smushed. I said, if I don’t get a seat by the window I am going to be carsick. No one even answered. I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. At school Mrs. Dickens liked Paul’s picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle. At singing time she said I sang too loud. At counting time she said I left out sixteen. Who needs sixteen? I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” And the day kept going for Alexander, more bad things happened.

Do you ever feel like Alexander? Where is hope when you need it? The worst part is when people tell you to just cheer up and things will work out. It is as if hope is a matter of just changing your attitude. Where is hope when you lose a child? Where is hope when the whole world turns against you? Where is hope when your house is bombed or hit by a hurricane? When we face difficulties or challenges in life, how do we keep our hope going? How do we keep ourselves centered on God’s love and mission for us? It is easy to be hopeful when things are going well. But in the face of cancer, war, tragic death, disabilities, divorce, how do we find hope? In her book, “Plan B,” Ann Lamott says, “The best thing I’ve heard lately is the Christian writer Barbara Johnson’s saying that we’re Easter people, living in a Good Friday world. I don’t have the right personality for GoodFriday, for the crucifixion.”

Our Bible reading today is about John the Baptist and his teaching about the coming of Christ. John’s story is one of hope. He came as a prophet after four hundred years with no official word from God for the people of Israel. He was born to elderly parents who were barren. He was a messenger of hope about the coming of the Kingdom of God. His message was harsh but underneath its roughness was an incredible gift of hope. He faced major obstacles to the message of hope he was presenting. He was not received well by the majority of the religious leaders of his time. He in fact ended up going to prison and then getting beheaded because of his teachings and his challenge to the injustices of his day. So, what got him through all of these difficulties? How did he find the hope to keep going even in the face of execution?

I believe that John was able to find hope in the face of all of his challenges because his life was aligned with the Spirit of God. John is described in Matthew as a wild man of the desert who ate locusts and honey. He was like the prophet Elijah in many ways. He was not afraid to speak his mind even to those who were in authority. John was shaped by his life in the desert. It is believed that he had a connection to the Qumran community of faith. He might have also been influenced by the Essenes. Both groups were people of faith who left the comforts of the cities and went out to live an ascetic kind of life. They mostly led a celibate but communal life — often compared by scholars to later Christian monastic living —. According to Josephus, they had customs and observances such as collective ownership, elected a leader to attend to the interests of the community. They obeyed his or her orders. They were forbidden from swearing oaths and sacrificing animals. They controlled their temper and served as channels of peace, carried weapons only as protection against robbers, had no slaves but served each other and, as a result of communal ownership, did not engage in trading. They lived a life that was focused on prayer and listening to God. Part of their activities included purification by water rituals. John’s association with these communities must have influenced him to learn how to find hope from within himself because of his relationship with God and not because of the circumstances of his life. The ascetic (monastic) life he led helped him learn how to be in tune with his own experience of God instead of being swayed by the popular religious views of his day. John the Baptist was the messenger who proclaimed the coming of Christ in a time of hopelessness for the people of Israel. They had lived for too long under the

oppression of the Roman Empire. They had almost lost all hope of the coming of the Messiah, the savior. The one who brought people hope and baptized them into that hope was the one who knew the true source of hope in himself.

Hope is an amazing gift to our lives. It helps us get through difficult times. Hope is one of the major gifts of faith. Yet, there are two main sources for hope in our lives: outside and inside. The outside kind of hope is temporary and comes to us from the circumstances of our lives such as health, relationships, jobs, and success. The inner kind of hope is more lasting and comes to us from within our souls. It is not the kind of hope that is easily lost when things don't go our way. It is the hope that John the Baptist knew as he preached in the face of opposition.

This is the second Sunday in Advent when we are invited to focus on and pray for hope. The invitation is not to pray only for things to change in our world, but it is an invitation to find hope even in the midst of pain. We can be attuned to the negative events of our lives and our world, or we can be attuned to the positive powers of love and healing in our hearts. The last couple of weeks I talked to you about our "emotional programs for happiness" as defined by Father Thomas Keating under the three categories of control/power, affection/esteem, and security. Today as we look at hope and finding hope from within ourselves, we can see that this frees us from our need for affection in order to feel OK. If we are able to focus on the love of God which is within us all the time no matter what, we can rise above the need to be praised, to be accepted, or be approved. We can stop spinning our wheels to make others like us or make them think that we are OK. We can stop the insanity of consumerism because we would have to keep up with what everyone else is buying and doing. Francis of Assis wrote, "Blessed is the servant who esteems himself/herself no better when he/she is praised and exalted by people than when he/she is considered worthless, simple, and despicable; for what a person is before God, that he/she is nothing more."

Our hope does not come from a distant future. Our hope comes from deeply knowing who we are as children of God. Just like John the Baptist, our time in the desert is very important to help us discover our identity and mission in life. We cannot have strength of Spirit without this time in the desert, without being unplugged in order to spend time in God's presence. So, this week I invite you again to find some time in quiet to listen to God and to listen to your soul. You can use the Faith in Action piece which is in your bulletin to spend time with God. Listening to your soul and spending time in quiet are the only ways to finding true hope in life. This can't just happen on Sunday morning once a week. It must become a way of life for you. Martin Luther suggested that we are to be baptized daily. That is, we are to daily experience repentance and forgiveness, a daily cleansing of our lives. If we bathed once a week, we would start to smell. We need to be washed daily to be truly clean and likewise in our spiritual walk with Christ. We are to be washed daily.

In his book, *A World of Stories*, William Bausch tells this story. It was high noon in Manhattan, and the streets were, as usual, buzzing with crowds, cars, taxis, horns blowing, brakes screeching, sirens wailing. Two men were making their way together through the crowd. One was a native New Yorker, and the other a visiting farmer from Kansas. Suddenly the farmer stopped in his tracks. "Hold on," he said, "I hear a cricket." His friend replied, "Are you kidding? Even if there were a cricket around here, which isn't likely, you would never be able to hear it over all this noise." The farmer remained quiet for a few minutes, then walked several paces to the corner where a bush was growing in a large cement planter. He turned several leaves over and found the cricket. The city man was flabbergasted. "What great ears you have," he said. "No," the farmer replied, "it's a matter of what you've been conditioned to listen for. Look, I'll show you." With that, he pulled a handful of coins from his pocket and let them drop to the sidewalk. As if on signal, every head on the block turned. "You see," said the farmer, "you hear what you want to hear. It's a matter of what you're listening for."

May we always be able to listen to the hope that is planted by God within each one of us. May we listen so that we are not afraid to face our Good Friday world and transform it through our hope and love. Amen.