

Hope

In the name of the God of hope, who is always coming into the world. Amen.

I must admit—the news has been pretty grim recently. Just picking up the Times this week I was often concerned, appalled, or frightened. We plunged into more ugly domestic politics; there was another hate-filled mass shooting, and we saw all manner of stories about unrest around the world, including the struggles in Hong Kong.

But... it's not all bad news, is it? Now and then there's a hope-studded story about personal triumphs and the growth of love in the world. Now and then we're able to rejoice. It's like going out into the darkness of the night sky. After a while our eyes adjust and we begin to see the stars. We find comfort in the glimmers of light that reach our eyes after years and years in the vastness of interstellar space.

How we yearn for these bits of hope and joy! How we yearn for things to be better. And how we often are left waiting for something that takes too long to come about. Advent reminds us that we are people who wait in hope for better times. We wait for the birth of the Savior afresh into our midst. We also wait in hope for the ultimate—which is our promised reunion with God. And we believe that our reunion after death is enabled by Jesus—who taught us, loved us, forgave us, and invited us into the heavenly places to live with him forever.

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Today is called Gaudete Sunday in the Christian tradition. It's named for the Latin word that means "Rejoice!" St. Andrew's even pulls out all the stops today and brings out the rose-

colored vestments that point to Joy / and that remind us to Hope.

There's a beautiful poem about Advent, written by Christina Rossetti. She was a British poet of the late 19th century—she's the one who wrote the words to our beautiful Christmas hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter." // Now, her long poem called "Advent" plays with the different movements of the season, from hopeful waiting to fulfillment in the birth of our Savior. Listen to the first stanza.

This Advent moon shines cold and clear,
These Advent nights are long;
Our lamps have burned year after year,
And still their flame is strong.
"Watchman, what of the night?" we cry,
Heart-sick with hope deferred:
"No speaking signs are in the sky,"
Is still the watchman's word.

Doesn't this poem set the tone for waiting and expectation? I love the line that says "Heartsick with hope deferred." That speaks even today, I think. But sometimes, now and then, we are granted glimpses of hope NOT deferred. Episodes that remind us that God is here and in charge, that everything will be ok after all. We often experience these infusions of hope when something beautiful breaks out into a place it doesn't necessarily belong.

When I was thinking about this sermon I remembered in my own life when something beautiful broke out into a space it didn't belong. Let me tell you about it.

It happened when I was learning to be a hospital chaplain, in preparation for ordination. I was called to the NICU, or the Newborn Intensive Care Unit one morning. A young couple were standing at some distance from their newborn's isolette

unit, and they were appalled and about as heart-sick as humans can ever be.

Their baby was born at about 22 weeks of gestation. He hardly looked human. He was hooked up to more tubes and things that beeped that we can imagine. And the nurses were appalled too because this *couple* couldn't even look at this child, who was sure to die very, very soon. They were so shocked and so sad.

After introducing myself to them and giving whatever sympathy I could, I asked their permission to go over to the isolette and speak with the baby, and touch him. I asked the nurse's permission, too. And as I did so, touching ever-so-gently his crepey-thin skin, I spoke to him, welcomed him into the world, and tried to comfort him.

And a beautiful thing happened: his oxygen numbers stopped dropping. And they even went up.

And an even more beautiful thing happened: the baby's mother then had the courage to want to touch and to love her baby, too, despite the fact that he wouldn't live long. That was a glimmer of hope for them—a breaking-out of something beautiful and unexpected.

In today's first reading Isaiah gives us prophecies of hope breaking through the darkness of despair. Isaiah says that when the Lord comes to save his people, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the mute will sing. And even the suffering of the Creation will be overturned as streams flow in the desert and burning sands are cooled. Isaiah's oracles point us to the coming of the Savior, God's Messiah. And that is itself a breaking out of something beautiful.

In our gospel John the Baptist needs hope to keep going in the face of his own imprisonment. He who was so sure of Jesus' identity when he baptized him, later on needs reassurance so

that he can keep on hoping and keep on waiting. And Jesus reassures him in Biblical code—referencing today’s passage from Isaiah. “Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Note that Jesus didn’t fix everything for John in a spectacular, clear-as-can-be way. He didn’t spring him from jail or assert in black and white terms that he, Jesus, was “The One.” But he certainly gave him hope.

And hope is there for us as well—there for the taking. When we are heart-sick with hope deferred, God—Jesus—brings us *hope: a breaking-out of something beautiful where it doesn’t belong*. But often it’s so subtle that it’s hard to notice.

I’m not sure about each of you here today, but for me those little drops of hope are the beauty of the woods and the skies, the lovely way that ducks sail across a placid pond, the beauty of candles and time-hallowed words, the wonder and joy of plunging deep into worship, a slow fall of snow that dusts the cattails in the field, and the beauty of good friends and family members who can receive my deepest worries and fears, and still love me anyway. These all say HOPE.

So, do what you can to find hope. *Cultivate it like you cultivate a garden or a potted plant.*

- Ground your hope in the soil of healthy community—a parish filled with good people and good friends who can pray with you and who can pray FOR you when you can’t pray / because of exhaustion or dejection.
- Water your hope with Scripture. Pray either Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer each day and feel the comfort of ritual and the water of the Word of God pouring over your soul and filling you up for whatever lies ahead.

- And fertilize your hope with prayer. There's no better way to know God than to speak with God / and to listen. Conversing regularly with God helps hope grow and flourish.

Do these kinds of things, and the God of hope will fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. And anticipate those glimpses of beauty springing forth where they don't much belong. Those are the work of God, dusting us with hope and with joy. Amen.