

Sermon – To Wait, To Hope, To Wonder
Scripture – Isaiah 40:1-5, 30-31, Mark 1:1-8
Sunday, December 6, 2020
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

On this Second Sunday of Advent, our first scripture reading is Isaiah 40:1-5 and 30-31. Disasters make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure. In the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; it occupied the land for fifty years. The exquisite poetry of Second Isaiah, beginning in chapter 40, emerges in the decades following the invasion, like a healing, life-creating song. Second Isaiah puts aside blaming and accusing speech, bursting out, instead, in lyric poetry of comfort, hope, and joy. This prophetic word is their anchor. Though everything else fails, God's word endures forever. The people wait for their reliable and loving God who prepares the way and who comes to lead them home. Listen now as God speaks to us in this time and place.

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken..."

30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; 31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 1:1-8. The good news of Mark's Gospel begins not with a birth story of Jesus (as in Matthew), not with the birth story of John the Baptist (as in Luke), and not with the beginning of time (as in John). Rather, the good news of the Gospel of Mark begins with a hearkening back to the words of the prophets and to an introduction of John, the Baptist who prepares the way for the "good news of Jesus Christ" with a call for repentance, for ethical renewal, and for a new beginning in baptism. Hear now God's Holy word.

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," 4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Amen.

The title of the sermon: “To Wait, To Hope, To Wonder”

Text: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. Isaiah 40:4a

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, during this season of waiting, hoping, and wondering, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Spera in Deo! Hope in God! These are the words with which we begin our advent journey each year. The Latin root for *spera* means “to hope” and “to wait!” Linguistically linked, waiting is an integral part of our hoping and without hope it is difficult to wait.

Each year Advent affirms the purpose in waiting. Waiting is not an absence or delay of experience but a deliberate action. Waiting involves the passage of time during which there can be healing, growth, introspection, and resolution. Each advent we wait and we hope in the God who brings words of comfort, well-being, assurance, and solidarity.

Spera in Deo is the motto of my alma mater, Hope College, a small, Christian, liberal arts school in Holland, Michigan, founded by a Dutch pastor, the Reverend Albertus Van Raalte in 1866. My mother’s great, great uncle, Jon Schaap, traveled from the Netherlands to Holland, Michigan across the hills and valley of the Atlantic Ocean with Rev. Van Raalte in 1847, fleeing religious persecution and seeking economic opportunity. The next year, Jon’s parents and siblings followed.

Several generations of my mother’s family are buried in the Pilgrim Home Cemetery in Holland, Michigan near the gravesite of Rev. Van Raalte. When our son Paul graduated from Hope College three years ago, we found ourselves serendipitously congregating at our relatives’ burial site which was adjacent to the football field where the graduation was held. It reminded us of our connection to the past and our hope for the future and we paused amidst the festivities to give thanks for the continuity of God’s steadfast love and mercy throughout the generations.

Today we honor members who have worshiped in this sanctuary for 50, 60 and 70 years. As we recognize this generation, we are mindful of the generations who have gone before us, the generations who will follow and we give thanks to the God who surprises each generation, time and time again, with unexpected words of comfort, peace, and tidings of joy.

Advent is a time to wait, to prepare our hearts and to reflect, not only on the joy and wonder of our God visiting us in the vulnerability of a child, but also on what is expected of each of us as a child of God. In our waiting and hoping we are called to persevere with strength, to keep on walking when the way is steep, to hold on to what is right when others wander from the path, to forgive those who trip us along the way, to return no one evil for evil, and to travel through life’s detours, both the glory and the pain, with humility and veracity.

The year before my call to Westminster I was reintroduced to the writings of Paul Tillich when I led a spiritual retreat in New Harmony, Indiana where his ashes are interred in a memorial garden. Returning to New Harmony with members of this faith community is on my bucket list. Tillich is regarded as one of the five most influential theologians of the 20th century. Born in Germany the year of our Lord 1886, Tillich was a beloved Lutheran pastor and seminary professor a century ago and was quick to speak out against the Nazi movement. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Tillich was dismissed from his seminary position. That summer

Reinhold Niebuhr visited Tillich in Germany and urged him to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, which he did.

Tillich is best known for his ability to integrate theology and psychology. In his deeply insightful and groundbreaking book published in 1952, The Courage to Be, Tillich identified three anxieties that come with being human and which can become roadblocks to prevent us from traveling the highway of our lives with meaning and effectiveness.

First, the anxiety of our mortality...For each of us there is a time to be born and a time to die. Second, the anxiety of our morality; an acknowledgement of our sinfulness and need for forgiveness...How can I make amends for the things I have done wrong and the people I have hurt? And finally, the anxiety of meaninglessness...At some point, our inner voice asks what is the purpose of my life?

Tillich's observation is that human beings cause themselves more pain and unhealthy anxiety by acting out to avoid these normal anxieties that are a part of the human experience. We busy ourselves with tasks that serve as distractions and we participate in behavior that is destructive rather than enter into the quiet places of solitude, embrace our inner journey, and accept our mortality. Surely, this pandemic and the devastating loss of life along the way has heightened our anxiety this Advent Season.

We have the *courage to be*, according to Paul Tillich, because we are loved by a God, who having been born in the Christ child and having walked the hills and valleys of life, understands what it is to be human and to have anxiety.

We have the *courage to die* because we have a God who embraced our mortality in Jesus of Nazareth and who conquered death by dying on a cross.

We have the *courage to live with meaning* because we have a God who lifts every valley, who makes low every mountain and hill, who levels the uneven ground and who smooths the rough places creating a highway through the wilderness of our lives; we have a God who speaks tenderly to us in the places we are held captive and hold ourselves captive; we have a God who forgives, who heals our transgressions and who renews our strength in the waiting and the hoping and the wondering of our lives.

My friends, may we be people who wait, who hope, who wonder, and who work together on the highway of the life that is ours, to lift every valley, to lower every mountain and hill, and to level the uneven, unjust, and inequitable places in our world. Amen.