

The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Rev. Cheryl Raine
December 1, 2019 – The First Sunday of Advent

The First Reading is Jeremiah 33:12-16

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at the time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be call: The Lord is our Righteousness.”

The Second Reading is Matthew 3:1-3

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ This is the one whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

The Message is entitled, *Deepen our Longing.*

In those days... Did you hear that phrase in both of our readings? In those days when the prophet Isaiah said, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” In those days when John the Baptist was proclaiming the kingdom of heaven has come near. In those days of stories long past is there a thread of hope to be found for these days when school shootings seem all too common, when wars continue to rage without end, when the population of those without homes continues to escalate, when the wealth gap continues to increase, as many struggle to provide basic daily necessities for their families?

Is there a thread of hope in the ancient prophetic words of Jeremiah and Isaiah that foretold of the coming of the Christ Child? And are we ready and willing to “Prepare the way of the Lord,” and receive anew the righteous Branch that seeks to create justice and righteousness among us?

As Advent unfolds, I am challenging all of us to make room within our busy lives to experience anew the hope of our faith. The question though is this: Will we risk making room? Will we risk welcoming into our lives anew the one John describes like this, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Listen to the words of a refrain sung by the contemporary Christian Artist Amy Grant, as she sings of this Word, the Breath of heaven:

Breath of heaven
Hold me together
Be forever near me
Lighten my darkness
Pour over me your holiness
For you are holy
Breath of heaven.

On this first day of Advent, December 1, 2019, what is your deepest longing - for you, for your family, for our world? Do you long for God to hold you together given the schedule that is before you, I know I do. Do you long for God to help you hold the weight of responsibilities currently on your shoulders? Is there some darkness that needs to be lightened or lifted from

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your soul or from our world around these days? Are you longing for the Breath of heaven to be forever near you now and always? What are our deepest longings this particular December? Hear our prayers, O God, and deepen our longing for you in these coming days.

Saint Augustine reminds us that our deepest longings cannot be met by things even though advertisers work overtime around this time of year to convince us otherwise with Black Friday and Cyber Monday deals. We will be inundated in the coming days with emails and commercials that demonstrate that hoped for things can cause great joy. Yet, this type of material joy is fleeting. Listen instead to the wisdom of Saint Augustine's words found in his *Confessions*, "[God] you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Notice the incredible hope found in the first half of this phrase: God made us for God's self. Take a moment to let that soak in. God made me. God made you. God made each of us for God's self. We are God breathed and created for a divine relationship. We are God's precious sons and daughters, part of God's holy family. Yet, do we allow this truth to soak deeply into our souls?

As this first week of Advent unfolds before us, I invite you to experiment with this simple breath prayer. As you draw in a breath, pray, "God, you made me," and then as you exhale, pray "I am your beloved child." I suggest that praying this simple breath prayer repeatedly will help you make room for God, as the prayer centers us more deeply on the giver of our very lives. Yes, God, deepen our longing for you and help us make more room in our lives for you.

The box office is teeming with new releases, although I haven't had the opportunity to see the new movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, yet. But, from Mister Rogers' life story, it is apparent that he made room for God in his life. He also recognized the gift of each person's life. No spoiler alert needed, as I am only sharing one line from the movie: Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers says, "The most important thing we can do for each person is let them know they are precious." And this is exactly what God says to us through the prophet Isaiah, "You are precious in my sight." Imagine what our world would be like if every human's most important work was to let others know they are precious. Imagine how different your day may be, if first and foremost you considered how to make anyone you encounter know that they are precious. Would this not encapsulate the hope God has for our world? When all people's hearts are rooted in the heart of God, knowing that they are precious and beloved. When every human life enhances another human life so that all life flourishes. This vision speaks to the hope found in the Branch, in the Breath of heaven, in the Christ Child we await.

Hans de Wit, a Dutch educator says that the realities of war, violence and continual trauma that bombard our senses in our wired world unfortunately cause us to disbelieve the hope of our faith story. We begin to disbelieve that every human is precious and desires for life to flourish. Instead of connecting to this hope, we see humanity disconnecting from the belief that life can flourish. We disbelieve that one life can enhance the life of another. This disconnecting leads us to distrust the other and this distrust seems to be permeating our country as well as our world. It doesn't matter if the disconnect is political or socio-economic, ethnicity or sexuality, religious or geographic. All disconnection creates distrust and it is rampant. In the midst of our culture where lines are drawn and divisions abound, where busyness defines us, where anxiety is skyrocketing, where people are lonelier than ever, will we

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hold fast to the thread of hope that we are indeed God's precious daughters and sons? Will we hold fast to the possibility that by simply offering the gift of who God made us to be, we can enhance the life of another?

Did you know that every Saturday from June to November the First United Methodist Church on Olive hosts a meal for those without homes and then from December to May University Methodist hosts the meal? Churches from around the city sponsor a Saturday and provide the food and hospitality. What struck me about my visit to this offering yesterday, was a woman volunteer who shared stories of how people's lives were enhanced through this and the weekly shower ministry also held at the First UMC. She shared stories of people who found their way back to jobs, housing and family. She personified for me the hope embedded in our faith story, that the world can be different than it is by simply offering the gift of who God made her to be.

Hans de Wit, says we all have the same deep belief that the gift of our God-given life can enhance the life of another. He even says that he can prove it. His proof is our compassionate human response to suffering whether of a human, an animal, or mother earth. Witnessing suffering breaks open our connection to the heart of God, to the one who made us and all of creation. We all long for life that flourishes.

I wonder by a show of hands how many of us have responded to suffering this past year whether through our dollars and our time, our phone calls and notecards, our prayers and community gatherings? Yet, how might we be even more intentional this Advent by remembering whose we are, by making room for God to soften our hearts again and again with the hope of a world where all of life flourishes?

As I reflected on making room for the thread of hope that we are made by God for God's self this past week, two poets came to mind. The first is Wendell Berry. Listen to some of his lines from his *Manifesto*: "So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Love someone who does not deserve it... be joyful though you have considered all the facts... practice resurrection." Berry urges us to practice hope by bearing witness to life and by bringing forth life from deadness. Practice hope this week by being counter-cultural, for hope imagines that the world can be different than it is. The world can be a place where all of life flourishes. This is the thread of hope proclaimed by the ancient prophetic words from Jeremiah and Isaiah.

The second poet is Mary Oliver for she challenges us by asking us a question. Listen deeply to the last line of her poem entitled, *A Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life during these days known as Advent? Are you going to make room for the Holy One who gave you the gift of life and sustains your life? Are you going to make room by honoring the longing you have for connecting with the mystery we call God? Listen once again to the words we sang just before the prayer for illumination today:

There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord for you to reveal yourself to us.

There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, our God.

Prepare the way of the Lord this Advent by making room in your heart for the Holy One who made you. You were created by love for love, so that you may flourish and come along side others so that they may flourish. May it be so with us. Amen.