

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2021
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7, Mark 1:2-8
“Hear Hope” by Rev. Sue Trigger

Isaiah 9:2, 6–7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
 those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
 authority rests upon his shoulders;
 and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 His authority shall grow continually,
 and there shall be endless peace
 for the throne of David and his kingdom.
 He will establish and uphold it
 with justice and with righteousness
 from this time onward and forevermore.
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
 “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight,’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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.”

The winter of 1978 and 79 was the second coldest winter of the 20th Century in the Great Plains. That winter 59.5 inches of snow fell. Trains got stuck in the high snow drifts, roads were closedⁱ and everyone stayed hunkered down at home.

In January that year we were hit with one the worst blizzards in US History. The storm brought 20 inches of snow fell and blew into 6 ft drifts. I will never forget that blizzard. At the time, our family lived on a small

acreage in rural Iowa. We were thankful for all of the canned foods mom and I had put up over the summer. I remember worrying about losing the electricity with the strong wind and the weight of the snow on the power lines. One afternoon we heard the sound of a horn honking down the road. *(Sound effect)* Not just any horn, but the horn from a Ford Model A pickup truck. We ran to the window to see if it was who we thought it was. Sure enough, it was our church organist and her husband driving their old pick up on top of the snow! There was no sign of the road, but that didn't matter, they made their own path. They came with some of Sunny's homemade cinnamon rolls and we had a wonderful evening playing games and singing old hymns together.

That visit is a special memory for me because of Ray and Sunny's visit. *(sound effect)* In the midst of the chaos of the blizzard, they brought hope. Even though we were stranded out in the middle of rural Iowa during a history making winter, we knew that there were friends there to help. We were not alone.

Not even a blizzard can compare with the pandemic we've been living through for nearly two years now. The burden of a deadly virus has left us all feeling stressed. We have been disconnected from each other. There have been quarrels over masks and vaccines. Even the stock market tanked after news of another variant in South Africa Friday. I will confess, that as another new wave of the virus appears to be coming upon us, I have felt hope collapsing. I have seen the struggle in the faces of our teachers and medical workers as they face daily criticism and hostility. I have seen the strain on families who continue to be separated in order to prevent spread of the virus to vulnerable family members. I have heard the frustration of church members who long for things to return to normal. Like a highway buried in frozen snow, we find ourselves in a time when we can't know where we are going. We are experiencing a kind of helplessness that our generation has never experienced.

I can't offer you a solution to the chaos we are living through. I can't proclaim that God is going to intervene and get rid of the virus. I can't promise that there will be a day when everyone agrees on the best solution to this global problem. What I can do is invite you to hold on to hope and join me in searching for the presence of God. There is a hope that can be found when we have exhausted all the hope that we can muster on our own. It is a hope that is untouched by the chaos of the world. It is a hope that is warm and bright and draws us together into God's embrace.

The Bible is full of searching people yearning for that hope. They traveled for days and years seeking a home, searching for a secure place with God's protection and provision. Throughout the Bible people wandered through desolate landscapes that matched their withered hearts. Even Jesus experienced the brutality of the wilderness. They all have one thing in common. They held on to hope. They trusted that God was close to them in their brokenness and would save their crushed spirits. In a time of weariness, they placed their hope in

God, who does not slumber or sleep, and collects their silent tears. The story of the Bible is a story of people searching for God's presence as God searched for them. We are living in one of those times.

We need to hear a word from the prophet Isaiah. "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and the young stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:28-31)

I want to begin this journey of Advent with a visual image of hope to hold on to. The Hebrew word for hope is pronounced Tikvah. It is a noun that means rope, or strong cord. Rahab let down the Tikvah to help Joshua's men reach safety after the battle of Jericho. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, "Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with Tikvah (hope)." *Jeremiah 29:11* Hope is not wishful thinking, but a strong rope that pulls us forward. During this season of Advent, we will join together to stretch out our searching hands together knowing that Jesus has already taken hold of us. Together we will seek hope beyond hope like a strong rope that pulls us and guides us to safety.

The coming weeks are a time for us to hear the gospel stories of hope in Jesus. His coming changed the story for all of creation as he gave us the promise of a creation where there will be peace for all people. But we have lived more than 2,000 years since Jesus spoke those words. We are still waiting for Jesus' promises and the promises of prophets who lived hundreds of years before Jesus to be fulfilled. Tikvah includes waiting. Waiting for something that we know will happen. We are waiting with anticipation and sometimes with impatience, for what we know and believe is coming. We participate with the generations of the faithful who waited and waited in hope for God's promises to be fulfilled.

While we wait, there is a message of hope that we all need to hear. The gospel of John begins with a story that isn't the typical Christmas story. There are no angels, shepherds, and kings. But there is good news that is announced with wonder: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. And the word became flesh and lived among us." The poetic words of the gospel are words of Tikvah – a strong rope to help us hold on while we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. While we wait, we remember the story of Jesus, Emmanuel – which means God with us. Hear the good news, friends. Listen to this tikvah, "You are not alone." No matter what lies ahead of you, God is with you.

Charlene Jin Lee is the author of an essay about our Advent themes of hear hope, see hope, share hope and proclaim hope. She shared a story about raising her children. She wrote that when she would drop her children off at school she would holler “God is with you.” Sometimes they would smile, and other times they would roll their eyes and respond with the reply she had taught them, “always.” She shared this story so that we can remember when pain and loss collide in our lives, when we feel as if we are buried in 6 ft of snow, when we are depleted and unsure about how to move forward, we can take hold of the tikvah God offers us and hold on remembering, you are not alone.

No matter what comes your way in the coming days, I pray that you will hear these words of hope. Repeat them after me, “God is with me...always.” This is the strong rope of hope. Hold on to it. Amen.

ⁱ In 1978, Iowa Plunged Into An Arctic Freeze That Makes This Year’s Winter Look Downright Mild, <https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/iowa/worst-winter-in-iowa-78-ia/>