

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

Isaiah 11; Matthew 3:1-12

Whitefish UMC

December 5, 2010

† Maybe it's all the gloomy, snowy days, but tears seem to come easily to me and to many folks these days. What is this about? While driving to the church this week in the slush, I heard this song on the radio:

† How pale is the sky that brings forth the rain
As the changing of seasons prepares me again
For the long bitter nights and the wild winter's day
My heart has grown cold my love stored away
My heart has grown cold my love stored away

I've been to the mountain left my tracks in the snow
Where souls have been lost and the walking wounded go
I've taken the pain no girl should endure
Faith can move mountains of that I am sure
But faith can move mountains of that I am sure

Just get me through December
A promise I'll remember
Get me through December
So I can start again

† No divine purpose brings freedom from sin
And peace is a gift that must come from within
I've looked for the love that will bring me to rest
Feeding this hunger beating strong in my chest
Feeding this hunger beating strong in my chest

Get me through December
A promise I'll remember
Get me through December
So I can start again.

† Funny, but I had never heard this song before, and yet it seemed to so accurately describe what a lot of us are going through. So I got to the church, opened up this wonderful invention called Pandora radio, where you can play songs you like on your computer while you are working, and typed in “Get Me Through December” in the search engine. And the most amazing thing happened: Pandora came up with a gazillion songs that express the longing of December and the struggle to match our real lives with the expectations of the season. It had taken my request beyond just one song and found enough to create a whole radio station of longing and wistfulness!

† What is this longing that we feel? The beautiful words from Isaiah express it well: we yearn for a sense of shalom, of wholeness, of peace, of value for us and our part in a peaceable kingdom.

† But life can be hard, and even though many of us lead what could be called privileged lives, we still have to go through rough patches. We may long for a child, but we can't get pregnant—or, we may become pregnant without planning it at a terrible time in our lives. We may lose our job, our parents or worse, our child. The person we thought we would spend our life with tells us that's not going to happen. We disappoint someone or injure them, and they can't forgive us. Perhaps we are unable to forgive a betrayal or a wound that leaves deep scars.

† And yet we long for things to be different; in spite of everything, we hope. But it is hard to pretend that everything is going to be okay, when it feels as if it won't. A friend of mine who faithfully attends AA meetings told me that their spiritual life was feeling empty, but that it was hard to go to church when they felt they could be more honest and real about their life at AA.

† At our new member class on Wednesday, many expressed how important it is to have a community of faith and support during the hard parts of life. But they also want to be able to share the joy they experience and extend it to others who aren't doing so well. I love what one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, says about the church, especially in Advent—the time of yearning and waiting in hope.

† During the first week of Advent our preacher, Veronica, said that this is life's nature, that lives and hearts get broken, those of people we love, those of people we'll never meet. She said the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward, and that we, who are more or less OK for now, need to take the tenderest

possible care of the more wounded people in the waiting room, until the healer comes. You sit with people, she said, you bring them juice and graham crackers.

† One pastor, reflecting on these words, talks about Advent worship this way: The memory of the plaintive words we'd sung but an hour before remain: words

like "come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's deep shadows put to flight;" words like "bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; fill the whole world with heaven's peace." "Veni Emmanuel" we sing in Advent.

Only then. It is the right song for the day.

† Veronica, Anne Lamott's pastor, knew what she was saying and when she was saying it. She knows everything's not okay for everyone in December, even those bravely singing about hope and peace and joy. She knows that lives and hearts that were broken, bruised, and chipped during the year are extra tender and vulnerable right now. She's acutely aware that appeals to help people we will never meet continue to our mailboxes. Her words remind us that in some years "the clouds of night" are heavier than they are in other years and that Advent has to be about more than just getting ready for Christmas.

† So how do we move through these weeks of Advent? Isaiah said we should "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." John the Baptizer echoes the prophet's cry. And as much as I try to

understand their words on a spiritual level, I can't help but think of a straighter, less congested [Highway 93], not a path through the Judean desert. I need more helpful directions for today.

† So does everyone who has spent time in the emergency rooms of life in 2010. Veronica suggests practical ways to live Advent. Take tender care of people. Sit with them. Comfort them. Watch over the wounded. Feed the hungry. Share food with people you love.

Together, we wait for the Healer to come. (Adapted from Advent message at Waco Baptist Church...)

† Anne Lamott says: “The belief is that enough hope and tenderness will lead to world peace, one mind at a time. All nations will come together in kindness and justice, swords will be beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.”

† We know that this is a little hard to buy with a world stage occupied by Kim Jung-Il and a bickering U. S. Congress. “But setting aside one's tiny tendency toward cynicism, in the meantime -- in Advent -- we wait; and hope appears if we truly desire to see it. Maybe it's in tiny little packets here and there, hidden in the dying grasslike winter wildflowers, but we find it where we can, and exactly as it comes to us, while the days grow dark. We remind ourselves that you can only see the stars when it is dark, and the darker it is, the brighter the light breaking through. Advent is about the coming of Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us,’ and so as the fields outside our windows go to sleep, we stay awake and watch, holding to the belief that God is with us, is close and present, and that we will be healed.”

† She continues: “I want that belief, and that patience; I checked the box on the form choosing that. But it has not been forthcoming. I have instead been feeling a little -- what is the psychiatric term? -- cuckoo. My mind has been doing a Native American worry chant,
WORRYworryworryworryworryworryworryworryworryWORRYworryworry ...
It's not that I don't have a lot of faith. It's just that I also have a lot of mental problems. And I want to fix them all, and I want to do that now, or at least by tomorrow afternoon, right after lunch.”

† Anne Lamott goes on to describe calling her pastor and several other clergy, including a rabbi, to see if they could fix her, but she found them all in bad moods. Her description of this effort is hilarious, but it would take too long to recount it. Finally, she writes:

† I called another minister. "My mind is on the fritz," I said. "I want God to reach down with His or Her magic wand and restore me to my former luster." "Good luck, Bubbie. Here's the only thing I'm sure of: Go take care of God's children today, and God will take care of you." "Does it say that somewhere?" "Yes, it's right here, under 'Secret of Life' in my Owner's Manual." "I never got an Owner's Manual."

† But, the minister says, some would say you did: It's the Bible. And what does it say? Don't spend time wallowing, just getting through the day—not every day at least. Feed the poor, heal the sick, comfort the broken-hearted, work for justice—no not just for some, but for everyone.

† Jan Richardson, writing in her *Painted Prayerbook*, offers this hope.

† The Word that took root
in the darkness of Mary's womb,
that took flesh and
walked around in this world,

that emerged not only
in the laboring of a woman
but also in the laboring
of generations to follow,
the ancient Word
that springs forth anew
—this Word seeks to dwell deeply in us,
to be born into the world through us
in this and every season.

† In a moment we will receive Holy Communion, each of us who longs for shalom. Yes, it is our version of bringing juice and graham crackers to the wounded people in the emergency ward waiting room, to us. But it is so much more. We believe and we proclaim that in the bread and unfermented wine, we know the ancient Word that springs forth anew, seeking to dwell deeply in us...in this and every season.

† Words of institution....

Sources:

Dr. Stephen Montgomery, “Not Much But Enough for Me,” <http://day1.org>

Anne Lamott, in a 1998 article in <http://www.salon.com>

Newsletter article of Waco Baptist Church, 2006.