

The Power of Hope

Our focus for reflection for all of Advent, in sync with our entire Diocese, has been ‘leaning into hope.’ In doing so, we are seeking to recover something very specific our church believes about hope, which is more than optimism and does not depend on if things are going well today or look good tomorrow. Like many aspects of God, hope is hidden on the surface, but by faith in times of trial, it rises up with great strength and blessing. In the readings from this season of Advent, Jesus gives us hints on uncovering this hidden power of hope in God, with a series of parables. He encourages us that if even one mustard seed is sprouting, even one coin or sheep is found, if only one person comes to the king’s banquet—these tiny seeds of hope are reason enough for a great celebration! For a glimmer of hope in God goes a very very long way! In today’s sermon, I want to take a closer look at how our Gospel reading invites us to uncover hope, and how small seeds of hope in hard times have revealed the power of God in the lives of several of our church members.

First let’s take a closer look at the parable from today’s Gospel reading, which provides a nice frame for our discussion of hope. Jesus tells a story which sums up all of the invitations we have from God to put aside our false hopes and lean into our final hope in God. He tells it this way. A king (representing God) is preparing a great heavenly banquet and has invited all of his people to come. As the day nears, the people find all kinds of excuses for why they can’t come; ‘I have to work,’ ‘I already have an engagement,’ etc. It seems that everybody is so preoccupied with the hopes they have for their own lives, they can’t see the hope which underlies all life, the loving care of our grace-filled God. This is not hard for us to understand in our own lives. As long as we feel self-sufficient and self-made, as long as things are going ok, we don’t feel the need for a greater hope. But what happens when we face a challenge that could easily overwhelm us? When we are losing someone dear to us? When we come to the end of our power to control our lives?

Our natural response in times of trial is fight or flight; the unholy trinity of anger, avoidance and denial. Our faith, however, invites us to a third alternative in facing trial, to lean into a hidden hope that rises up to embrace us as we believe. That’s what our speakers described in their Advent testimonies, how in dark times they leaned into hope and were not allowed to fall, but rather were lifted up by God and his Spirit working in others. Listen again to their stories in the context of Jesus’ invitations to uncover the hidden power of hope.

Yn. Anna shared with us the suffering and despair which overcame Armenia during and after the 44 day war in Artsakh. What Yn. Anna didn’t share was that she spent weeks of sleepless nights messaging and speaking with families through their time of loss. What kept her going, though, was the small but powerful kernel of hope that family after family relayed to her. ‘I can’t tell you how much it means to us that, from the other side of the world, you call to check in and show you care. That hope means everything to us.’ Then, when Yn. Anna’s health gave out from sheer exhaustion, seemingly out of nowhere, Jamie and Leanna Stevens and others like them, leaned into hope to put aside their needs for the need of others. In doing so, they all planted seeds of hope which have grown to testify to the powerful grace of God.

Our retired Armenian Army Veteran, Arsen Sahakyan, shared how he leaned deeper into hope during his tour of duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2016. As a colonel, he was responsible for fifty young soldiers, who as their tour continued, experienced more and more the violent distress of war; daily rocket attacks, roadside bombs and losses of soldiers who one day were at lunch, and the next day, gone. His soldiers had become despondent, but Arsen had the spiritual insight to see that they weren’t lazy or afraid, they were in despair, suffering from a lack of hope. ‘We needed a constant reminder, a hope,’ said Arsen ‘that God would lead us through this difficult situation.’ He decided to build an outdoor chapel, complete with an Armenian Church monument, where soldiers could daily pray, light candles and remember in whom their ultimate hope lies. This little seed of hope, in a short period of time, grew into a place of worship for more than 8,000 soldiers of all nations.

Brothers and sisters, in this season of Advent, which is dedicated to hope in the coming presence of God, I pray that today you have heard some of God’s quiet invitations for a deeper hope for our lives. Often these invitations to hope do not look like much on the surface, and may seem inferior to the high hopes we hold for our own lives. But when times of trial come, large and small, let’s not fight or take flight, for neither of these paths lead to life. Instead, let us lean into a hope that can bear our full weight, and the full weight of all creation, lifting us up in great celebration and joy. Our sins are forgiven. Love is on the way. Christ has been born and is revealed to those who place their hopes in Him, now and always, amen!