

Mark 1: 1-8
Advent 1 – Hope - Sunday, Dec. 3, 2017

At one of the churches that I served, there was a lovely member of the congregation who took great delight in surprising the ministers with small gifts through the Advent season. One year, just before the first Sunday of Advent, a gift bag appeared on my church office door. Inside the bag was a coffee mug; a mug that said, “Where there is coffee, there is hope!”

There has never been a more perfect gift for me.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the start of the church season when we begin to prepare for Christmas. This morning we lit the first candle on our Advent wreath. And this first Sunday in Advent, like all the other Sundays in Advent, has a traditional meaning and theme. The first Sunday is focused on hope, and the next three on peace, joy, and love. And so over the course of this month, we are going to be thinking about those things, praying about them, and embodying them in our lives so that as we wait for Christmas, hope, peace, joy, and love will surround us, and transform our world.

We are indeed a people who hope. We hope for peace around the world, for right relationships with each other, for reconciliation with First Peoples, for climate justice and an end to division and strife in our families, in our communities, and even our churches. We long for a hope to settle even the deepest hurts of our hearts and yet sometimes the circumstances of life eat away at us, bit by bit.

But this week - one small glimmer of light gives us hope. Interestingly enough, this morning’s reading from the Gospel doesn’t specifically talk about hope; it talks about preparation.

Mark’s gospel recounts: “John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance ... and people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” This was also written in the prophet Isaiah:

“The voice of one calling in the wilderness,
 ‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
 make his paths straight.’

This time of year is all about preparation. We prepare our homes (and our church!) by hanging and displaying décor so that we are always surrounded by the beauty of the season. We prepare our shopping lists and brave the crowds so that we can give gifts to our loved ones and friends. We prepare menus and centerpieces for parties and dinners. We bake cookies, and fruitcakes, and mincemeat tarts. We prepare our homes for gatherings with friends and family.

We spend so much time preparing our lives for the Christmas holiday. But what do we need to do to prepare the way for God to come into our lives?

I think that when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and proclaimed that Jesus was coming, he was not just telling people that someone was coming, but he was also trying to get them to see that there was work that needed to be done. Advent is about waking up, and being prepared. But not because we are afraid. But because something big is about to happen, and God is in the midst of it.

And that's because Christmas is kind of a both/and holiday. It is both about something that happened thousands of years ago, and it is also about something that is happening now. Christmas is something that keeps happening in our lives. And each year this celebration can help us to remember that.

Because Christmas is all about God becoming one of us. Not like one of us, or pretending to be one of us, but God choosing to be one of us. It's God loving us so much that God came into the world not in power, or wealth, or prominence, but as a little child who had none of those things, and yet who changed everything. And it's about the fact that God has never stopped being a part of our world.

Christmas is about God breaking into this world, and God breaking into our hearts. And, in a strange way, Advent is the season where you and I help God get ready to pull off the ultimate break and enter.

We do this by preparing ourselves to be broken into. And so, we unlock the doors of our hearts and minds, the ones we keep sealed up so much of the year out of fear, or anxiety, or pain, or hatred. We shut off the alarm systems that keep us on edge, and keep us from opening ourselves wide. And in this season, somehow, we find a way to be just a little more loving, just a little more joyous, and just a little more hopeful.

And the hope comes where we least expect it. Because contrary to what the ads might tell you, hope does not come from the latest iPhone or gadget. Hope is not dependent on whether you get everything on your Christmas list this year, or even whether your kids or grandkids do. It doesn't even come from having the perfect Christmas cookies, or lights, or tree.

Instead, the hope comes when God breaks into our hearts, the same hearts which are so often broken by this world. Because you can be the most positive and optimistic person in the world, and yet you have to admit that there is a lot in this world that can break your heart.

However, the meaning of Christmas is God saying it doesn't have to be that way. And the meaning of Advent is us saying, "We agree, and so we are going to get ready for another way."

This year, how are you going to help God's love to break into this broken world? How are you going to prepare for something better, not just for a few weeks every December, but for always?

Where do we hope love breaks into and enters this December? Egypt? Syria? The US? Here in our very community? I hope for all of those places. But before I can hope for any of those places, I have to first hope that God's love breaks into my own heart, and changes me.

I have to be ready to let God's love do that. I have to be willing to be transformed. And I have to accept that fact that once God is in, everything is going to be different. I can't hope and also cling to the way I want things to be all at the same time. Because if I want to choose God's hope, I also have to choose to let go of all of my expectations.

And so, on this first Sunday of Advent, we can choose to live into that hope.

This year I urge you to intentionally prepare yourselves for hope. Look at it as though you were preparing for any other aspect of this holiday. Think about how you are going to achieve this. Make it a priority.

So now hopefully you're thinking. Heather, this sounds great. Sign me up – but how? Come to church whether it's on Sundays or for something special through this month like the One December Night concert or Longest Night service. Take part in the life of your community of faith. Set aside time every day to read an Advent devotional or a spiritual reading (Jan Richardson writes some of my favourites) or reflect on the season that is happening around you. Colour this week's bulletin cover – and the ones in the weeks to come - as a time of spiritual preparation, reflection and rest. Spend time in prayer – or even just in silence. Reach out to someone who you know might be struggling. Let go of your judgment towards others and try to remember that no one is perfect and that everyone is trying their best in their own way. Consider alternative gift giving for that person in your life that you are struggling to find the right gift for – such as the United Church's Gifts with Mission. Or create a reverse advent calendar and each day put in an item to share with the food bank, our Mitten Tree, or for White Gift Sunday.

And share what you are doing with others! Tell your friends that you are coming to church during Advent and on Christmas Eve – and then invite them to come along! Do not be afraid to let people know what you are celebrating and how you are preparing to celebrate.

While it might easier for me to find a coffee mug with a cute saying on it, I think the bigger gift in this time is the gift of waiting, of preparing, of hoping.

This morning we opened our service with a hymn that you have probably sung many times before, the classic hymn of Advent. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel", which means, literally, "O

come, O come, God-with-us". It's a prayer in itself. An invitation to God to enter into our hearts, and to change everything this Advent.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel...we are ready. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Rev. Heather Power