

2 Advent December 8, 2024      Never Beyond Hope

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Have any of you been to the small town of Hope in Arizona? According to the Rev. Joseph Nassal, a Roman Catholic priest in his book *Stations of the Crib, A Journey of Hope from Advent to Epiphany*, Hope is the name of a real town, tiny one off the interstate on a road that leads out of the desert into the mountains. The town of Hope boasts a service station and café attached to an antique shop. That's it. It's too small to justify putting it on a map. But despite its bleak landscape, the residents of Hope have a sense of humor, and about a mile out of town they put up a sign that reads: "You Are Now Beyond Hope."

The idea of being beyond hope or hopeless is one prophets do not accept, although they would probably laugh at the sign outside the small town. One of the main roles of a prophet is to listen to God and to remind the rest of us God is not done with us, because God loves us, and no matter what circumstances we are in, we can always turn to God. Prophets believe we are never beyond hope because God will never abandon us, even if we feel distant or estranged from God, God is always waiting for us to turn away from whatever is alienating us from God and turn back to God.

Advent is a season for prophets, and could be called a season of prophecy, which is why its most prominent character is John the Baptist. We will hear more from and about John before Advent is over, but today we are introduced to him as a prophet, one some scholars call the last of the Old Testament style prophets, the one who stands in between what was and what is to be, whose role is to prepare people for what is coming.

We can tell John is a prophet because he was hanging out in the wilderness, away from cities, and all the stuff of city life. John was the son of a priest who most likely left behind a pretty good life, probably one that guaranteed a good job following in his father's footsteps, to go into the wilderness to wait and listen for God.

The wilderness was an important place for prophets. It is where God spoke, or where they could hear God better away from the noise, busyness, and distractions of city life. It also was considered a dangerous place where people were vulnerable to the elements and other dangers like robbers. That vulnerability had something to do with growing closer to God, teaching dependence on God like during the forty years God's People wandered in the wilderness.

That is where we find John in today's Gospel, and we read is where he heard God, and where John invited people to come to the Jordan River and participate in a ritual; one that involves a familiar religious practice of washing to symbolize turning away from sin and returning to God. The reason for this ritual was to help people become aware that something new was coming into the world, something new God was up to, and to help them be ready to recognize it when it showed up.

This did not happen in a made up or imaginary world of fantasy, but one rooted in the harsh reality of oppressive empires that kept law and order through violence and threat of violence. That is what the first part of today's Gospel is about. By listing the names of men and the places they governed, the author of Luke's Gospel gives us an idea of a precise place and moment in the history of the world; and tells us a little about the way those men ruled and the overall feelings of the people they ruled. Spoiler alert: these were not beloved leaders.

According to Biblical scholars and historians, Rome had been in power over that area for about 100 years and many Jewish people were constantly dissatisfied and growing agitated because of the cruel, greedy, and corrupt leadership over them. For example, the emperor Tiberius was considered ruthless, cruel, was worshipped as a god in parts of the empire, and even though he was not officially described as persecuting Jews did not hesitate to deport Jewish people. The children of Herod the Great had set up a

family monopoly of power in collaboration with Rome, and were not considered legitimate or qualified to fill their self-appointed role. Pilate's reputation was that of being inflexible except when given a bribe. Instead of being free from or counter the influence of Rome, religious leaders were criticized for caring for about piety rules, buildings, and money than the poor and suffering.

Some scholars tell us people were beginning to despair because there had not been a prophet for hundreds of years and others deeply yearned for God to once again call them into the wilderness, away from the oppression of Rome and into the freedom of God, like God did ages ago when Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt.

Yet, instead of feeling beyond hope, many people were ready to listen to a prophet and waited for one to emerge. So, when John called people to come into the wilderness, they responded. John wasn't inviting people to a relaxing retreat or to take a hike or meditate or feel closer to God just by being in a beautiful place outside the city. He invited them to come to the Jordan River and participate in a new ritual, one that pointed them back to God by asking them to repent, to turn away from whatever they had been following and turn again to God who was about to do something new. This invitation reminded them of the crossing of the Red Sea, and promised a similar new life.

John's invitation is not only for that time and place, it is the invitation the season of Advent is offering us today, in this place. We are fortunate to live in a beautiful place, one some people might call wilderness because it is far from the big cities, is in fact where a lot of people come to get away from it all and can offer us some quiet. Of course, that does not mean we don't have our challenges, fears, or worries. Those are everywhere you go, just like in John the Baptist's day. But wilderness can also be a place for reflection, to recognize the truth in ourselves and our community. Far from being a hopeless or despairing practice, such reflection is the first step in turning away from whatever we may have been giving too much attention to that prohibits us from growing closer God and turning towards God who is waiting for us. Reflecting is not only hopeful, it can bring us peace. Perhaps not the peace of Rome or the absence of conflict, but the peace of Jesus that sustains us and helps us practice gratitude and generosity in all situations.

As we enter the second week in Advent, perhaps we might each take a moment to reflect on John's invitation to turn away from whatever might be weighing you down and turn toward God. This is not the same thing as neglecting responsibilities or ignoring important issues. Reflecting can help us understand those issues or responsibilities differently and figure out ways to approach them that can be less stressful. Prophets preach reflection because it can start us turning away from things like greed, desire to control what we cannot control, fear, despair, and other harmful influences that attempt to convince us the world is beyond hope, and instead turn toward the hope that brings the deep peace of Jesus to all places and all times. Just like in John's day, God is waiting for you.