

Advent Homily
Isaiah 11:1-2; Luke 2:1-7; Luke 2:8-16; John 1:1-14; Mark 16:1-8
November 27, 2016
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On Thursday as I began preparing the stuffing for the Thanksgiving feast in my kitchen with shallots, loaves of French bread, tarragon, and a lot of butter on the countertop; but first, I turned on the “singers and swing station” (number 947 on Comcast), to listen to the old big band tunes and jazzy crooners. I kept hearing songs about dreams. “Dream a little dream of me,” and “You’ve got to have a dream, or how will you have a dream come true?” As I chopped the shallots, I thought about the difference between hoping and dreaming.

It seemed to me that hoping is something that you can actually believe will happen, maybe because it has happened before and so you know it to be true. Dreaming comes from the imagination, so you may not have the groundedness of belief – it’s more like an illusion. Desmond Tutu says, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.” With hope, then, you can actually see it and believe it. Sometimes, though we believe in and hope for things we haven’t seen, and that is faith. Now it might be that you can actually see the light in darkness, or that you see in a way that is not with your eyes but with your heart.

Like my orchids. Can you believe I water this orchid? It looks like a couple of dead sticks. But I water these sticks because I know that if I am patient, the buds will someday appear that will turn into beautiful flowers. I don’t know the day this will happen. I can’t mark it on my calendar. Sometimes it happens in just a few weeks, sometimes 8 or 9 months. I hope that the flowers will appear, confident that they will because I have seen it happen before. I know it to be true. I don’t have to dream it, because I’ve seen it.

Advent is the season of expectation, where we hope. The Advent Scripture today, read by Colton from Isaiah, says, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The passage describes a family tree. Jesse is the name of David’s father; David being the second king of Israel, who had ruled about 300 years before this passage was written. The people in Isaiah’s time were hoping for a new king, a righteous ruler, someone who would promote justice and peace in the land. The stump itself looks rather hopeless, as Israel has been conquered by Assyria, but the Jewish people are promised by the prophet Isaiah that a shoot will come out of the stump of Jesse-- a new branch in the Davidic line. And this gives them hope.

The early Christians believed that Jesus was this king promised by Isaiah: someone who was not merely a human presence, but a divine presence; someone truly sent by God; someone who embodied God, someone who was and is God.

Our Christian faith is based on this hope. That because a righteous branch was promised to come from the stump, and that Jesus did come and brought new life for all people, that this life is always possible.

Maybe there is some part of your life that feels like you have lost hope. A dream that you had once but is now gone. A stump in your life that only reminds you of sadness.

What if God was preparing a shoot to come from this stump? What if God was nurturing growth from this dead place, where something new and good and beautiful was going to poke out? Maybe the place of sadness or darkness or desolation is actually a place where God is going to create new life.

Kind of like when you skin your knee, it heals. When the leaves fall off the tree, they sprout again in spring. The other passages read today are also about new life., new hope. When there is no room at the inn, God provides a comfy manger. When the shepherds, working the night shift, see a blinding light, they are told not to be afraid – they are the first to hear the good news about the birth of the Christ child. When it is dark the light shines. When Jesus dies, he lives again.

This is the hope that we live with as Christians. This is the hope that we live with in Advent. The good news today is that even though it may be dark, (even by 5pm!), even though there is a stump or a tomb of hopelessness, God is always working to create new life, and this is our light. The light is our hope, and the hope is our light. (Show the blooming orchid). As Desmond Tutu said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”