

HOPE SHOWED UP  
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; John 1: 6-8, 19-28  
Third Sunday of Advent • December 17, 2023  
By Pat Berger

Imagine what your Advent and Christmas preparations would be like in some places in this country, this weekend: the East Coast is battling snow, strong winds, flooding. There are places in Europe where recent earthquakes and flooding have made life much more complicated. And then there is life in what we commonly call "the Holy Land." When our focus at this time of the year is our preparation for the birth of the Christ, rather than focusing on our preparation for the birth of the Christ, we can be consumed by these things.

And the very same thing brings hope into the above situations as brings hope into any of ours: we are preparing to celebrate the birth of the Christ, the birth of hope in a broken world. None of us would say that our circumstances are absolutely perfect, any more than would anyone have in Jesus' time, or anyone in the time during which Isaiah prophesied, as Doris just read for us. Today's reading was written by the one known as Third Isaiah, who was another who studied under Isaiah and continued his voice for the people Israel.

By the time of our reading for today, the Hebrews had returned from the time of exile; they worked at rebuilding a sense of community and their temple and their lives – and it was never easy. The message this speaker for Isaiah brought to the people from their God in these verses is one of good news and hope and even a bit of a change in direction. This Isaiah has been given a specific task here; the spirit of God was on him, and had anointed him to, "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of God, to comfort all who mourn." The results of all of this would be, he told his listeners, that ruins would be built up, devastations raised up, ruined cities repaired. And why would all of this happen? Remember, "why" is a God question; all of this would happen because, "I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing, I will give them their recompense, I will make an everlasting covenant." None of what Isaiah has said for God in this book will happen only because of the chosen-ness of the Hebrew people; it will happen because their God is a God who loves justice, who loves them, who has plans for them to be light and life in the divine created world. Hope has, indeed, shown up.

And as we turn to our reading from John's Gospel, we see that hope is about to show up again. God didn't just make a covenant with the Hebrew people and then leave. God continued to accompany them through the ages, and at a point, the time had clearly come for God's Son to come, as a person, into the world. Our verses from John's Gospel introduce the introducer: a man named

John. When we read carefully, we see that this John – who is not called “John the Baptist” here -- this John becomes known to the readers more by who he is not than by who he is. He is not the light, but he came to testify to the light; he is not the Messiah (even though no one had even asked that question yet!); he is not Elijah or a prophet. As Gary Charles wrote in his commentary, “John is a witness, sent by God to testify to ‘the Word made flesh,’ ‘the Light’ that no darkness has or will ever extinguish. The principal vocation of John in this Gospel then is to bear witness, a verb that occurs thirty-three times in the Fourth Gospel and only twice in the entirety of the [other three] gospels.” John the Witness, we might call him, comes to bring hope to the people; the hope he brings is that the Hope of the World, Jesus, the Messiah, is among them.

At last! the people may have said. Those in positions of power in the temple had made their lives difficult; the Romans had made their lives difficult. Now, The One is among them. Hope has shown up. What will that mean for them? They can't possibly know, but they will be finding out in the next few short years. We do know what it meant for them; all of these years and experiences later, what does it mean for us? A part of God's challenge for us might be found in that word “witness.” We are not called to be Jesus, after all; we are called to follow Jesus, to witness to what he did and what he and those who follow him continue to do among us. Where do we see hope? Where do we see The Light, even a tiny bit of light? Can we adjust our eyes so that we see light where there may be very little? We can be like John; we can bear witness; we can say, “Look!” Each of us has a story or stories about where we have seen the Light of Christ active around us and through us. A kind word changes someone's day, or saves a situation. Someone is a dollar short in the grocery line; suddenly a dollar is on the counter, and there is a very grateful look. A child comes to school without a coat, and a parent returns to school with an extra one. A Salvation Army bell ringer stands in the cold and is cold and still manages a smile for each one who comes out of the store, whether or not today is the day we can put coins or dollars into the bucket. We see these things; maybe our Advent preparation is simply to point and say, “Look!” We may have just pointed to Jesus among us.

Let us pray.