

Sunday, December 8, 2013

**O, the mystery of God's dwelling**

Advent 2 . . . in our relationships!

– Overflowing in Hope (Rom 15:13)

A year ago September, members of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences gathered for their plenary assembly to explore the social and spiritual aspects of the challenges of our times.

And specifically, to address what they regarded as the "greatest evil of our time."

That evil, expressed by Cardinal Péter Erdő is a "lack of hope."

Cardinal Erdo expressed that our lack of hope in this world has become an epidemic.

But, he continued, the Church has the answer to "the most profound expectations of humanity, to its most hidden yearning - that answer is Christ." (cf. <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/lack-of-hope-called-today-s-greatest-evil>)

Christ is the Answer may sound somewhat trite in light of what seems to be going on in our world.

When we turn on the news, we find a world full of violence, insatiable greed, where we excel at dehumanizing one another.

Just this past week I have had numerous conversations about workplace environments, Christmas consumerism, the insidiousness of militaristic images within our culture.

**Where is hope to be found?**

**For too many in our world, our families, we find ourselves in "dark places"**

**How is our living making a difference?**

An acquaintance of mine – Pernell Goodyear, who started *The Freeway* in one of the worst neighborhoods in Canada in downtown Hamilton, wondered that same thing.

He thought he'd be a "rock star" coming into this neighborhood and turning everything on its head just by starting a new church there.

Three years into the project, none of his plans seemed to bring about lasting change – and they began asking, **what difference does it make in us being here?**

And then they began using a different set of metrics than they had used before

– from: how are we growing, how many people are coming into our space

– to a new set of questions:

– "does our being here cause the crime rate to drop?" "does our being here, worshiping, living, loving, ministering, help single parent families live better, help parent their kids better?" **"Are we bringing hope and change?"**

They began wondering how God's reign might actually bring change to the part of their world, rather than God's reign being about the success of their church project.

**They are still trying to figure this out because there seems to be another reality that we face in living out our discipleship.**

How we live does not always seem to work in this world – particularly in the short run.

**But if we understand that God is eking out the kingdom through ordinary moments, then maybe asking whether our way of life works is not the right question.**

For our living is first about a calling

- and it is about expressing, revealing, demonstrating a different kind of reality
  - a different kind of justice,
  - a different way of showing mercy and grace,
  - a different kind of belief in peace and hope,
  - a different way of being human in the world.

If we measure the effectiveness of our faith by what works, we are likely to lose hope

- because what works in our world in many ways is in contrast to the ways of the Spirit.

But our hope is not grounded in what works, nor our discouragement shaped by what does not work;

**Our hope is grounded in a relationship,**

- a relationship with God who has come to be among us;
- a relationship with God that sustains us
- a relationship with the One who is able to bring about what is becoming and what will be.

Our Advent scriptures today focus on Hope: - our need for hope;

- and how often in seeking certainty in our lives, we cling to false hopes;

But we discover that Hope is a Person

- that hope abounds when it is rooted in the Spirit of God
- when it is rooted in the Living Christ;

We are called to be a people who are always hoping

- otherwise we discover we confine hope to a box;
- we confine Jesus to a box,
- a compartment in our lives,
- and we box ourselves in as well.

I have come to discover that the only certainty I have in my life is the hope that is Christ.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are depicted in Matthew's gospel as coming to John with an air of certainty

And John the Baptist calls them out on it.

He is uncovering their false hope that relies upon their ability to keep the law, their ability to keep themselves holy and pure.

But John declares that hope is to be found not in our certainty – be it in our actions, our believing, etc.

But that real hope has its grounding in a Person

- one whom John expresses that he is unworthy even to untie his sandals
- for he shall baptize with Spirit and fire.

Spirit – that's great!

Fire – well not so good!

But fire is good – if we think of what fire does – rather than thinking of it as the eternal fire of damnation – which may be how this is often preached;

Our being baptized with fire by Jesus is actually a word of hope, real hope.

This fire that Jesus brings burns up the chaff in our lives

- burns up what discourages us,
- burns up what keeps our eyes off of God,
- burns up what keeps us self-sufficient, and expressing a selfish certainty,
- burns away hope that is false

And, in burning off what needs to be burned off, we are invited to live hopeful lives dependent on the grace and mercies of God, embraced by the love of God, encouraged to live in the hope of God.

It's not a destructive fire, it's a refining fire – which is another way of being open to the Spirit in our lives – being shaped and transformed by the Spirit as followers of Jesus who are living into the different reality of God's reign here on earth.

And as we live our lives, more and more open to God's Spirit, we discover there is no rationing of hope,

But hope overflows as God moves all history towards shalom; moves all humanity towards reconciliation and wholeness – such as the work of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa in opposition to Apartheid.

### **What does such a living in hope look like?**

It a hope that is expressed in prayer

– not just wishing something for one another, but expressing the hope of a different reality in each of our lives.

We pray for those in need of healing in our community, because hope is believing that healing is coming.

We pray for those struggling with addictive habits in our community, because hope is believing that liberation is coming.

We pray for those in dark places in their lives, because hope is believing that their release from darkness is coming.

We pray for those of us who struggle with anxiety because hope is believing that freedom from anxiety is coming.

We pray for those among us who live wondering where their next piece of bread comes from, because hope is believing that their ability to pay for their bills and to be sustained is coming.

We pray with hope because we are a people who are living out our present lives in relation to the future reality that will be.

We are signs, foretaste and instrument of God's present and coming reign.

We live out the new reality that is constantly breaking in and transforming the old reality – and baptism with Spirit and fire actually transforms and re-creates us in ways in which our lives more and more display the embodiment of the hope that is to be found in Christ Jesus.

## **Are we, are you, open to this hope being birthed within us?**

For as we are transformed by this living hope, our living out our ordinary lives in this world is a critical aspect of demonstrating the radical inbreaking of God's hope, transforming old wineskins, structures, and power systems in our broken world,

We are signs of this new hope in this world; a hope that creates life  
– the kind of life people all around us are seeking, coming out to the Jordan to discover, crying out to receive.

People are hungry for hope, real hope, not false hope.

And so, Isaiah 11 is not just a wistful fantasy – it is an expression of a new reality that we are living into – a future reality that shapes the way we live in the present, a reality that enables us to encounter all we encounter with hope and to infect others with the same hope that has taken hold of us in the power of the Holy Spirit:

“Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.

<sup>2</sup> And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

<sup>3</sup> He will delight in obeying the LORD.

He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay.

<sup>4</sup> He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited.

The earth will shake at the force of his word,

and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.

<sup>5</sup> He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.

<sup>6</sup> In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. <sup>7</sup> The cow will graze near the bear.

The cub and the calf will lie down together.

The lion will eat hay like a cow.

<sup>8</sup> The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.

<sup>9</sup> Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.

<sup>10</sup> In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world.

The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.”

## **And this Hope is rooted in a Person**

– as Solomon prays in Psalm 72 (a Royal Psalm foreshadowing Christ Jesus):

“Give your love of justice to the king, O God, and righteousness to the king's son.

<sup>2</sup> Help him judge your people in the right way; let the poor always be treated fairly.

<sup>4</sup> Help him to defend the poor, to rescue the children of the needy, and to crush their oppressors. <sup>6</sup> May the king's rule be refreshing like spring rain on freshly cut grass, like the showers that water the earth.

<sup>7</sup> May all the godly flourish during his reign.

May there be abundant prosperity until the moon is no more.”

This hope is not just something we merely believe in

– this hope is what we live by!

And we live this way because we believe that not only is this the way our world will be **BUT, we believe that because Christ is our Hope, that we are ones who are bringing about such a world NOW**

May we receive the gift of this hope given to us by the Spirit of Christ.

May we live our lives as Ones who are the carriers of God's Hope in a world which is desperately seeking Hope that is real.