

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Advent: Now or Never

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 8, 2013
The Second Sunday of Advent—Based on Matthew 3:1-12*

I visited with my mother this week for a couple of days; mostly it was just she and I. At nearly 96 she is remarkably healthy in some ways, markedly less so in others. Clarity about details and memory of just about everything are hard to come by these days. We covered an ever-diminishing agenda of topics, several times over every single hour. There is nothing whatsoever extraordinary about her condition—many, many people in her age group endure such issues and many much worse than hers. It is only extraordinary because it is my mother. And so I listened, and I gave the same answers over and over and to the best of my ability appeared interested when hearing again and again some detail that seemed to be particularly important to her.

Something about that time, cherished in its way though not the easiest moments ever spent with her, feels like Advent to me. This is the season of the poignant moment, the season of liminality; life is neither as it was nor as it will be. Waiting is its hallmark, lifecycle being its principal laboratory, the place where waiting comes quite literally at the beginning of life, often again at its end, and in ways only sometimes discernible to us at every point along the way. The Advent message to live in the moment does not change the fact that somehow simply knowing that all that is to be has not yet come.

Just as my plane touched down at LaGuardia late Thursday afternoon, I immediately switched my phone from airplane mode to be connected with the world again, intent upon learning what I might have missed in my couple of hours in flight. God forbid that I should not know everything instantly. Several pop-up news service messages announced to me that Nelson Mandela had died, this giant of a man, no longer waiting but now present in that mysterious state which comes after this one. Not knowing precisely what to call it, we refer to it as the fullness of life, life on the other shore, the larger life—all attempts to speak of what we now only imagine but for which our souls are designed to long. What and wherever that place is, should it exist as a place at all, it is now beyond a doubt the residence of Nelson Mandela.

Twenty-seven long years in prison for the crime of desiring and working for that which was not yet but undoubtedly had to come, President Mandela was and is a saint of Advent. Though surely there must have been moments of despair and darkness, moments in which his eyes wavered from the prize, he lived and wrote and worked during those long years for that which would come. And, then, upon his release, among the first words he spoke were words of forgiveness and reconciliation, not words that erased the travesty of justice which had been done, but words which looked beyond the pain of the present with enough forgiveness to imagine a future that truly could be radically different from the past.

When I hear the poetic words of Isaiah, which we heard read a few moments ago, I am stirred deeply for reasons that are not thoroughly apparent to me. "A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots," so claimed the persistent Isaiah. From the cold stump of death and decay, a shoot shall come, he said, a stubborn, insistent burst of life, which defies the presumption that life has ended. How could we not think of Mr. Mandela, all those years appearing to be a lifeless stump from which no movement for change or justice could conceivably come, and, yet, somehow being the shimmering shoot, which the entire world would come to see as a symbol for hope and light where there was so little of either?

I don't know if Nelson Mandela heard these words of Isaiah in his heart or imagined himself in this light. Who can say? The context in which Isaiah wrote and spoke these rhapsodic words was similarly hopeless, as dark and barren as any prison dungeon. Life was crumbling around him, around all the people of Israel in the midyears of the 8th century BCE. The Assyrians rampaged throughout the countryside of Israel, leaving a trail of destruction and death, which portrayed the opposite of the idyllic image of Isaiah's words. His hope came not from the reality of the moment or from the moments of glory in the past but derived from the promise of what was not yet, but which in the hope of God existed as a possibility in the future.

This year in The Forum, the adult hour between the 9 and 11 o'clock services, I have had the extraordinary opportunity of talking to a wide variety of outstanding men and women about faith and life. In interviews with three men on separate occasions, each from his particular tradition, I got the same answer to a question I posed about hope. A rabbi spoke of his work in Israel, attempting to forge conversation and relationship among Jews, Muslims and Christians living in the tinderbox of Jerusalem, the holy city of three religions. An imam, who has known both the rave of approval and the ire of criticism, spoke passionately from his platform of moderation at a time when moderation was despised by many and suspected by many more. A statesman, whose life since leaving public office has been that of a global peacemaker, told how day after day he held himself and his staff to the task of speaking peace into a conundrum of violence about which the consensus was that peace was impossible. When I asked each man how he remained hopeful in these settings and if, indeed, he still has hope, the responses were almost identical: "I had hope then and I have hope now because I must; it is inconceivable to live in the absence of hope."

My life is not nearly so important or complicated or broadly cast as that of these extraordinary folk. You probably feel that way about yours. And, yet, though the circumstances of our lives are ours and not theirs, the realities before us and the choices available to us are not dissimilar. Each of us struggles; each of us faces moments when we must make choices to live either as people of hope or as people of cynicism and despair. In truth, most of us have lived in moments—I know this is true for me—and sometimes in longer stretches than that—of hopelessness. But thanks be to God, I also know what it feels like—and I pray you do, too—to come out of those periods of darkness and to hope again.

The witness of Isaiah and of Mandela, the witness of the other men I mentioned, is that what we know today never precludes what might be tomorrow. That assurance, that promise, is, I believe, the ultimate lesson of Advent. And yet it is not as easy a lesson as it sounds, certainly not for me. I am much too anxious to easily learn such truth. I am still looking for the day—all of us are, I expect—when wolves will lie with lambs and young goats can snooze contentedly next to a leopard. Actually we don't care so much that the animals do it as we want to know peace much closer to home in our own species: peace in our families, our intimate relationships, peace at work, peace in our communities. And we wonder about how the justice upon which that kind of peace inevitably relies will ever find voice in this world.

Advent somehow is spacious enough to hold both hope and our doubts and fears. It makes room for me to behold my mother, fearful not that she will die, but that she will not live well; it makes room to lose a leader like Nelson Mandela in the full hope that over the arc of what is to come there will be others to take his mantle; it gives breathing space to conflicts in this world that appear to be and in fact are bigger than the solutions we can imagine. It holds before us the truth that a time shall come, most likely in starts and stops, moments here and moments there, when hope wins—moments when the realm of God is present in our hearts and here on this earth, moments when Christ has come again.

In the name of God: *Amen.*