

Hope Will Not Be Silent
First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2022, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

May the words of my mouth and meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength, our courage, and our freedom.

"**The first candle of Advent is the candle of Hope.**" And here we are again -- marking yet another trip around the sun and the beginning of another new church year ... marking it as generations upon generations have done before us ... with the lighting of the first candle on the Advent wreath, the praying of the familiar prayers and the singing of the familiar hymns as we settle into the familiar time of preparation for the coming of our Lord.

And yet, perhaps what binds us most to those generations on whose shoulders we stand on this First Sunday of Advent 2022 is not the constancy of rituals and routines but the inevitability of change ... and the necessity of those rituals and routines changing and adapting as we move forward into the future evolving -- sometimes it feels before our very eyes -- and sometimes it feels like one step forward, two steps back.

It is into that cycle of both hope and change -- and yes, I choose those words advisedly and not lightly -- that we step as we cross the threshold into this new church year.

And this year here at All Saint Church, one of the things that changes is the lens through which we will read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the sacred texts appointed for our weekly worship.

The churchy word for the cycle of those readings is "Lectionary" -- and this year ... as you may have read in our newsletter ... we are using "*A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*" created by our scholar-in-community Dr. Wil Gaffney.

Earlier this week in her introduction the lectionary, Dr. Gayle Fisher-Stewart reminded us that this women's lectionary for the whole church **is for the whole church not just women** ... and not just Episcopalians... but for the whole church.

It is a chance for the church to read its sacred texts not for **confirmation** of what it thinks it already knows -- but to let the sacred text speak to it anew -- to tell the whole story.

It is a chance to listen to how the story of God is told when the stories of women are moved from the margins and held in the center. It is a chance to tread into unsettled waters -- unsettled waters that risk changes that are revolutionary, revelatory, and threatening.

And it is an opportunity recognize that in so doing we follow in the footsteps of the radical rabbi from Nazareth who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one

another by doing **exactly** what Dr. Gaffney is doing with this lectionary for the whole church ... by centering voices from the margins and threatening the powerful in the center.

You remember the story. The one where Jesus had the soft launch of his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth and they invited him to read in synagogue that Sabbath -- so he unrolled the scroll and read from Isaiah:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
She has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And then he got to his big finish:

“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!”

... and they were all thumbs up and attaboy and

“Hey, isn’t this the son of Joseph ... I know his folks!” ...

until he decentered **them** from the text

by centering a woman and a foreigner --

the widow of Zarephath and some guy named Naaman the Syrian.

And – as the story goes – “On hearing this, all the people in the synagogue were enraged. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him over the cliff.”

Beloveds, this is what happens when we follow the Jesus who treads into unsettled waters.

It doesn’t lead to “nice sermon” handshakes at the door and likes on Facebook.

It leads to unsettled waters that risk changes that are revolutionary, revelatory, and threatening. And the threat is real.

In the words of biblical scholar Dr. Verna Dozier *“Jesus announced that the kingdom of God had come with him and ... offered another possibility to humankind. But since it is another possibility that threatens the existing arrangements the existing arrangements will bend every effort to destroy it: to water it down with religion or threaten it with disloyalty.”*

Will bend **every** effort to destroy it.

When you “threaten the existing arrangements” the existing arrangements can and will do whatever it takes to destroy that threat.

The existing arrangement of White Supremacist Patriarchy will do whatever it takes to destroy

the threat of sharing power with Black, Brown, Queer and Female people – including dismantling democracy and replacing it with oligarchy if necessary.

The existing arrangement of cisgender heteronormativity will do whatever it takes to destroy the challenge of transgender and non-binary people seeking to speak their own truth and live their own experience of gender identity – a challenge we see in sharp relief in the onslaught of anti-trans and “don’t say gay” legislation across our nation.

The existing arrangements within the church are designed to keep people conveniently & perpetually in need of a forgiveness that only the church can provide will do whatever it can to hold onto its power by marginalizing and dismissing theologies and narratives that challenge it.

And the existing arrangement of Church-aligned-with-Empire will literally do whatever it takes to destroy any threat to its power – which is what accounts for the rising tide of Christian Nationalism in our nation and in our world.

Nevertheless, we persist.

And on this First Sunday of Advent
we celebrate not only that there is both hope **and** change –
we celebrate that there is hope **IN** change.

And we claim the vision represented in the graphic
on our bulletin cover this morning ...

May we grow back not to what was but to what we might become

... **because** we follow a radical rabbi from Nazareth
who is about both hope AND change.

Hear again these words from poet Alice Walker:

*The world has changed:
Wake up! Give yourself the gift of a new day.
The world has changed:
This does not mean you were never hurt.
The world has changed: Rise!
Yes & shine!
Resist the siren call of disbelief.
The world has changed:
Don't let yourself remain asleep to it.*

Our challenge this Advent season is to **resist the siren call of disbelief** that our hope can change anything ... because it not only can – it does

It is to claim the hope we find in the telling and re-telling of the stories of our spiritual ancestors -- even as we frame and re-frame their telling by centering historically marginalized voices.

It is to continue to pray for the grace to cast away the works of enslavement and be clothed in the hope of liberation.

And it is to embrace the promise in today's reading from Romans:

*Hope that is seen is not hope.
For who hopes for what is seen?
But if we hope for what we do not see,
we wait for it with patience.*

And while we wait – with patience – we remember that another Radical Rabbi – Rabbi Abraham Heschel – famously said “*Patience, a quality of holiness may be sloth in the soul when associated with the lack of righteous indignation.*”

We can be patient – and indignant.
We can be patient – and persistent.
We can embody both change – and hope
Because hope will never be silent.

Hope will never be silent.

Today we mark the forty-fourth anniversary of the assassination of Harvey Milk – member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and a national gay rights leader. On November 27, 1978, Milk and Mayor George Moscone were gunned down in City Hall by Dan White, a disgruntled former supervisor. Mourning and riots throughout San Francisco followed news of the assassinations and White's subsequent conviction for manslaughter rather than murder.

Nevertheless, the message Harvey Milk proclaimed forty-four years ago still preaches to us today:
*“You have to give them hope.
Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow,
hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great.
If there is a message I have to give, it is this:
that you have to give people hope ...”*

And so on this First Sunday of Advent in the Year of Our Lord 2022

for all the daunting challenges there are still to face
for all the work there is yet to do
for all the changes that stand between us
and the Beloved Community God would have us be,
let us remember today that
we are where we are today
because of those who believed in the hope in their hearts
enough to risk the threats from “the existing arrangements”
in order to live out that hope in the world.

Hear again the words of Alice Walker:

*The world has changed:
It did not change without your numbers
your fierce love of self & cosmos
it did not change without your strength.
The world has changed:
Wake up! Give yourself the gift of a new day.*

And then let us pray:

*Come, O Christ and dwell among us! Hear our cries, come set us free.
Give us hope and faith and gladness. Show us what there yet can be.*

Set us free to be the change you call us to be.
Set us free to live your love.
Set us free to be your justice.
Set us free to journey into the adventure of God’s future this Advent and always.
Set us free to proclaim the Hope that will never be silent.
Amen.