

November 27, 2022

WAITING WITH ANTICIPATION AND HOPE

President Obama's former pastor, The Rev. Jeremiah Wright, recalled attending a lecture at Virginia Union University School of Theology, delivered by a Baptist minister; the late Reverend Dr Frederick Sampson. In that lecture, Dr Sampson made reference to a painting entitled "Hope" by the English painter George Frederic Watts, which was done in 1886. He spoke of it being a study in contradictions, because the title and the details on the painting seem to be in direct opposition.

The painting's title is "Hope." It shows a woman sitting on top of the world, playing a harp. What more enviable position could one ever hope to achieve than being on top of the world with everyone dancing to your music? Says Dr. Sampson.

But as you look closer, he said, the illusion of power gives way to the reality of pain. When you look at the woman in the painting, you discover this woman is in hell. She is wearing rags. Her tattered clothes look as if the woman herself has come through a terrible ordeal. Her head is bandaged, and blood seeps through the bandages. Scars and cuts are visible on her face, her arms, and her legs.

And a closer look reveals that all the strings of the harp, but one, are broken or ripped out. Even the instrument has been damaged by what she has been through. She is the classic example of quiet despair. Yet the artist dares to entitle the painting Hope.

According to Rev Wright, Dr Sampson said he wanted to quarrel with the artist for having the gall to name that painting Hope when all he could see in the picture was desperation.

Then he looked above her head, and he found some small notes of music written there, moving joyfully toward heaven, and he began to understand why the artist titled the painting "Hope." With her clothes in rags, her body scarred and bruised and bleeding, her harp all but destroyed and with only one string left, she had the courage to make music and praise God.

Rev Wright sums up Dr. Sampson's reflection on the painting by saying: "That is what the audacity to hope will do for you".

Audacity – meaning boldness or daring confidence.

We may not be like that woman, sitting on top of the world, clothed in rags, battered and bruised, but we know that we do share in a life that is marked by brokenness and filled with contradictions. There may be a smile on our faces and laughter in our voices, but upon a closer look, our lives reveal the reality of pain that no one fully knows about or understands. Amidst life's joys, we have to deal with illness and death, failures and setbacks, and other personal anxieties and tragedies.

We inhabit a world that is marked by brokenness and filled with contradictions. We live in a land of plenty, yet there are many all over, who only know a life of poverty.

Ours is a land of peace, but daily we hear of wars and conflicts in many places.

We are part of a church that is also marked by brokenness and filled with contradictions. We proclaim a God who is Love and who is Lord of all, yet we often find it difficult to entrust ourselves fully to that God. We boldly proclaim that God is with us, yet we don't always acknowledge God. We are people of faith, yet so often fear overtakes us.

But in spite of all the brokenness and contradictions of our life, here we are on this first day of Advent, speaking of hope.

What is this hope of which we speak?

Hope is a word that we use very often, and many times when we use the word hope, it is to wish for or expect something without certainty of its fulfillment. For example, we may say "I hope that things will change", but what we mean is that we would like for things to change, but we are not sure if it will happen. So in fact when we say that we hope that something will or will not happen, we are quite often, expressing uncertainty.

But that is not the hope of which the Bible speaks. In the Bible, the word hope speaks of certainty, of confident expectation, of firm assurance. It is not an anxious waiting for a favourable outcome of things over which we have little or no control. The way hope works is that: "It holds stubbornly to a better future, without a precise timetable or illusions about specific outcomes. Hope is not passive waiting; it is active seeking and forward leaning. It is a bridge from the present to the future. It is a bridge between us and God, who will ultimately deliver.

Hope is about a way to live - to live with a faith that continues to see possibility when there is no present evidence of it. Such hope is bold and daring - it is audacious.

Such hope is audacious because it is not based on us; on what we can do, or the extent to which we can control our circumstances; it is based on God; on what God has promised and on the faithfulness of God.

We cannot escape the fact that we live in a broken world, and that some of us have to deal with seemingly unyielding personal stresses and problems and anxieties as we struggle to survive and try to be happy.

That may be our reality, but it's not all of it. It is also our reality that Christ came in response to our brokenness, and that he will come again to bring to fullness that which he started.

So Advent is about hope, hope that is found in Jesus who gives us reasons to live and love and be joyful, even when, like the lady in Watt's painting, we have lost so much.

The hope that is found in Jesus is a hope that gives our lives meaning and possibilities in spite of our present experiences and circumstances. It is a hope that is grounded in the assurance that there is more to life than the stresses and strains, the fears and disappointments, the momentary joys and the fleeting pleasures that we experience; and that what we experience now, is not what will ultimately be. It is a hope that springs from the knowledge that our destiny is not determined by our circumstances, but is in the hands of a God who loves us.

Hope is a gift from God; it is reflective of our relationship with, and our faith in God

In this season of Advent, whether we are looking back at the birth of Jesus the Christ, or looking forward to the coming of Christ, the message is the same. It is a message of hope - audacious hope – a bold and daring confidence in the love and goodness, and salvation of God.

So in this season of Advent, let us embrace Christ and let us embrace that hope; for ourselves, our families, our relationships, our church and our world, and let us live with boldness, confidence, and eager anticipation, watching for God to show up in expected as well as unexpected ways, times, places and people.

Thanks be to God.

Rev. Sydney Elias