

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 28, 2021 – 1 Advent
Hope
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On the four Sundays of Advent this year I will share some reflections on traditional Advent themes. This morning we begin with hope.

Christian hope centers in God. As The Book of Common Prayer expresses it, our hope is “the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world” (page 861). We believe in and hope for the triumph of God’s love over hate, God’s justice over injustice, God’s freedom over bondage, community with God over separation, life with God over the power of death. We have many sources of this hope, chiefly the birth, life, ministry, and resurrection from the dead of Jesus the Christ.

As individuals we hope for fullness of life with God, something we only partially experience now. Because we believe that God wants the health and salvation of all God’s children, we have hope that we will be finally healed, finally saved, finally at home with God. That is our hope for ourselves, our hope for the people we love, and, by God’s grace, our hope for all people. Christians also hope for the renewal of all creation. We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth. We hope for nothing less than the redemption of the world by God.

In her book, “Gathering at God’s Table: The Meaning of Mission in the Feast of Faith,” former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori writes about living in joyful hope. I would like to share some of her wise words with you:

“Christian communities are places of hope. We’re all in the same boat – we’re looking for home, we want to belong, we want to be valued, we want to be welcomed in a place of safety and warmth by people who love us.... We gather as a community to catch a glimpse of a dream that’s big enough and encouraging enough to begin to drive out fear and where we can begin to experience a deep and abiding and transforming hope.... Hope – holy hope, even holy hope-filled boldness – is the only known antidote for fear, depression, boredom, abandonment, lostness, exile, grief. Hope is what our faith demands, and offers” (pages 186-189).

Our holy hope orients us to the future, but also guides us now, in the present, if we will allow it to work on our hearts and minds. Genuine hope for the establishment of God’s kingdom forever has the power to lead us to love in action now. Because our faith and our hope make it impossible for us to accept the world of injustice and suffering as it is without doing what we can to bring justice, mercy, peace, and relief to God’s children with whom we live in this time, in this place and throughout the world. Our hope for the future when God’s dream becomes reality can inspire us and guide us into working with God now, in mercy.

Hope has the power to transform our lives. This transformation may come through asking ourselves this question: how does our behavior affect the hope of others? In the service of Evening Prayer in The Book of Common Prayer there is a series of suffrages or intercessory prayers (pages 121-2). They include these words: "Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten; nor the hope of the poor be taken away." "Nor the hope of the poor be taken away." How can we help make sure that the hope of the poor is not taken away?

Many of us say a prayer before we eat to thank God for our food. Might we extend that moment of gratitude to think of people who truly hope for daily food? No one here actually hopes for daily food. We can be confident of having food to eat. Poor people hope for food. How does their hope shape our lives now? How might holy hope for the good of all God's people transform our decisions today, especially in this season of preparation for our yearly celebration of Jesus' birth? How might we help others have what is necessary to sustain life? In this culture of consumerism how might our actions reveal our holy hope in God who – in the words of Mary's song – "has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty"?

Katharine Jefferts Schori contrasted hope and fear. Thinking about the power of hope to drive out fear put me in mind of one of our most beloved Christmas carols, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Remember these words:

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

For Christ is born of Mary; and gathered all above, while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth! And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.

Where children pure and happy pray to the blessed Child, where misery cries out to thee, Son of the mother mild; where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door, the dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more."

May the holy mystery of God's love revealed through the incarnation of God in Christ inspire us all with deep faith in God and with holy hope for the final establishment of God's kingdom. And may our faith and our hope lead us to live in love today and all our days. In Jesus' name. Amen.