

**“On that day...”**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the Lord shall 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.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.  
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;  
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Isaiah 11:1-10

Will you pray with me. Ever hope-filled God, we come to the beginning of the church year again, some of us mumbling, “Didn’t we just do this?” Others of us saying eagerly, “I love starting over each year during the holidays!” Meet each one of us where we are this day, O God. Help us to grasp what this season is really about. Amen.

This isn’t exactly the sermon I was planning to deliver today. I was going to give a little Christian theology lesson about the meaning of Advent (which I will still do in a minute) and end by reading to you the first Presidential Thanksgiving Day Proclamation issued by George Washington on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1789 in New York City. Washington’s

proclamation speaks of the commitment by all in government and public life in the new republic to strive to live up to the standard of one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

I was going to attempt to relate this proclamation to our Advent theme for today of hope – hope for a renewed commitment by our government officials, by all of us, to look forward with hope to a new day of peace, a new day when as Isaiah proclaimed, “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Is 11:6)

But... I was reminded early this morning that yesterday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, was a day in history that I believe at least a few of you remember. It was the anniversary of the surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Navy on December 7, 1941. It was the attack that sparked our nation’s entry into World War II. President Franklin Roosevelt called it, ‘A day which will live in infamy,’ as some 2,400 American service members lost their lives and another 1,200 were wounded.

Some of us here this morning weren’t born until after World War II, so what we know of the attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor only comes to us from our school history books or perhaps from the memories of our grandparents or other oldest relatives and friends who were old enough in 1941 to remember the day.

I didn’t grow up in a military family. My only personal appreciation of World War II comes from a dear and old friend in Lincolnville, who is gone now. Frank fought at the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. He shared a memory with me one day about ten years ago, as he came up out of one of his fields after digging a hole for a post on his farm on Youngtown Road in Lincolnville. He told me that the only reason he was still alive was that he dug his fox hole a little deeper than his buddies during the war. I’ve never forgotten Frank’s words. He dug HIS fox hole a little deeper.

I know that Pearl Harbor Day is remembered with as much or more heartache and despair as for those of us who remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. We hold remembrances of these tragic and death dealing anniversaries because we must not forget the price paid, the lives shattered and lost, the suddenly and unexpectedly dashed hopes for a peaceful world that bring us to attention each year.

And so from dashed hopes of the past we come to our Advent theme today of hope for the future. What is hope? (get responses) There is one constant, I believe, in how we think about hope. Hope is always, *always* forward looking. We never say, “Gee, I hope last week went well!” Or, “I hope I lost ten pounds last year!” Or, “I hope I didn’t come down with the flu last winter.” Or, “I hope my relationship with my partner, spouse, or co-worker improved last year.”

Hope is *always* looking forward – to this afternoon, to next week, to the end of our days in this life – hope is not for yesterday, or even for this morning before we arrived here, but from this point forward, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, until death do us part from one another.

I don’t know about you, and I’ve said this before, but I’d rather live *with* hope than *without* hope. Some days the future just looks too dreary and dim to live without the

hope that better things are yet to come. Too many Black Fridays, too many hurts, too many scary diagnoses, too much of all that is not life giving confronts each one of us every day... To live without hope is to live without the promise, for those of us who are Christians, of Jesus proclaiming to the criminal hanging beside him on another cross, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:14)

To live without hope is to live without the affirmation of that Holy Presence – whether you call it God, or Spirit, or Jesus the Christ, or whatever your sacred frame of reference might be – that assures us each moment, “all will be well, all manner of things will be well... if not in the near future, then in the distant future.” This is a paraphrase of the words of Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich which is close to my consciousness each day.

So our text from the prophet Isaiah today is filled with hope – the hope that a new leader will come to the people who will rule with all righteousness and faithfulness – Christians interpret this new leader to be Jesus, the hope that not only the animals of the forest, but all people – even Republicans and Democrats in our day – will learn to get along together, and maybe even, dare I say it – like one another and sit down and share a glass of wine or sparkling cider together! I know it’s a distant and perhaps far-fetched hope, but a hope of mine, nonetheless.

So I said I was going to talk about the meaning of Advent – what IS the Season of Advent really about? (get responses) Catholic nun and prolific writer, Joan Chittister writes of the church year: “When all the feasts have been celebrated and all the prayers are said and done, the strength, and power of the liturgical [church] year does not lie in its cataloging of feast days and seasons, as important as these are. Nor does it lie in its rubrics and rituals. *The real power of the liturgical year is its spiritual capacity to touch and plumb the depths of the human experience, to stir the human heart.* (italics added)

By walking the way of the life of Jesus, by moving into the experience of Jesus, we discover the meaning of our own experiences, the undercurrent of our own emotions, the struggle it takes to go on walking the way. By taking us into the depth of what it means to be a human on the way to God – to suffer and to wonder, to know abandonment and false support, to believe and to doubt – *the liturgical year break us open to the divine.* (italics added) It gives us the energy to become the fullness of ourselves. It makes the next step possible. It calms us as we stumble from one to the other. It leads us beyond our present selves to the self that lies in wait for God.”<sup>1</sup>

Joan Chittister describes more fully and more meaningfully than anyone I know the reason I love the church year with all its moods and seasons, its rituals and reflections. “The real power of the liturgical year is its spiritual capacity to touch and plumb the depths of the human experience, to stir the human heart.”

The liturgical year, all the seasons of that year, beginning with Advent, are not for *God’s* well being, but for *ours*. Let’s face it – with Black Fridays, too much rich food, too many things to do on our “to do” lists between now and Christmas Eve, it is a gift of

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<sup>1</sup>Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year, the Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009, p. 58-59.

the Spirit that the church year gives us the opportunity, if we take it, to “plumb the depths” of our human experience, our human hearts.

The Season of Advent, as it is usually practiced, offers us four different themes for each Sunday of Advent. Today our theme is hope. Last Sunday it was.... peace. The third Sunday of Advent addresses joy. And the last Sunday of Advent, two days before Christmas Eve, focuses on love. These four themes of Advent are, or should be I think, the centerpieces of our lives – peace, hope, joy and love. Striving for *peace* within and without, *hoping* for a new day, a new dawn in all of our lives, *joy* in the midst of many sadnesses, and *love* for one another and for God can get us through any difficulty that comes before us. Can we each dig OUR foxholes of safety a little deeper so we might come to live in harmony one day? Might we even invite a nasty neighbor or two to hunker down with us so we might share our hopes for the future together?

As Isaiah proclaimed so long ago, “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Let the people say, “Amen.”