

“A Reason to Hope”

Third Sunday in Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28

On Monday morning, December 1, my neighbor had a reason to hope. Because he had a reason to hope he took action. He shut off his water. At first it seems like a foolish thing to do in the middle of Southern California’s worst droughts on record. Hope can often lead people to do seemingly foolish things. But the circumstance and the context is important to know.

On Tuesday, December 2 we received a nice steady rainfall here in San Diego. By some estimates we took in about ten percent of our annual rainfall. It was a great blessing from the Lord and an answer to our prayers as we have been praying for rain here at Atonement for some weeks now. The rain came on Tuesday but on Monday my neighbor shut off his irrigation because he had a reason to hope. And in hope, he took action.

Some dictionaries define hope as “a feeling of expectation.” Others might suggest it is “a desire for a certain thing to happen.” Still others will add that hope is “a feeling of trust.” Regardless of the definition we might embrace, the fact is that two weeks ago, the weather forecasters here in San Diego gave the entire county a reason to hope as they forecasted a significant rainfall. Perhaps many of you acted in similar ways as my neighbor, shutting off your irrigation even before the first drop of rain fell to the ground. Perhaps you also felt as though you had a reason to hope and so, in hope, you took action.

In our Gospel reading this morning the leaders of the Jewish people sent priests and Levites to a man to ask him questions because they wanted a reason to hope. They heard the forecast. They heard the rumor that this man John was sent from God. We took some time last week in our sermon and service to learn more about this John and hear his message. The forecasters reported that this man wore camel’s hair, ate locusts and wild honey, and stood on the edge of the wilderness of Judea, outside of the city of Jerusalem. They reported that he stood on the edge of the wilderness and preached a message of repentance. They reported that he claimed he was a messenger from God. This gave all of the people who were looking for such a messenger from God a reason to hope. The Jewish leaders took action. They acted in hope and sent people to investigate this John character.

It is a deeply human instinct to hope in something. As a pastor I have the unique privilege and opportunity to visit people in difficult moments of their lives. Often times that difficult moment is right after they have just received some difficult news. I have the opportunity to visit people after they just receive news that the lump of skin on their neck is indeed cancerous. I have the opportunity to talk with people and listen to them as they tell me about a beloved pet that went missing. To be sure, it is a great responsibility to listen and care for people as a Pastor.

As I listen and care, I often discover a remarkable thing. I discover that people in difficult situations have hope. They have strong desires for a lost pet to be found and cancerous tumor to be benign. It is a deeply human instinct for people to hope.

And people act in hope in many different ways. A person who is struggling with cancer endures chemotherapy treatment. A person who is missing a pet will take the time to hang missing pet posters on lamp posts and billboards outside of grocery stores. Even in difficult times people have hope. And even in difficult and trying times we act in hope.

At the time of Jesus the Jewish people had set their hope in the promise of God's Messiah. God had promised by the prophets that there would be an anointed one who would come as the fulfillment of his promise. Their hope was that the Christ would come to put down the Roman rulers that were lording it over them. Their hope was that the Christ would come to rule as an earthly king to give them back their land, their temple, and their nation. And in our reading the Jewish people sent representatives to see if he had come. They heard the reports. The forecasters have spoken. They wanted a reason to hope. Now they had a reason to hope that a Messiah had finally come.

These priests and Levites that represented the hope of the Jewish nation acted on their hope with questions. We had the privilege to listen in on their conversation this morning. They ask John, "Who are you" (Jn 1:19)? "Are you the Christ, the promised one that we have been hoping for?" "Are you Elijah, the prophet of old who was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot?" (Jn 1:21)? "Are you the prophet like Moses who was promised to come" (Jn 1:21; Dt 18:15-18)?

And John answered their questions by pointing them to Jesus. He declared that he was the voice that prepares the way for the Christ, the Messiah. On the edge of the wilderness John answers the questions of people who are looking for a reason to hope by pointing them to Jesus. Jesus is the one. He is the one who has come to give them hope. He is the Messiah. He is the fulfillment of God's promise. By standing in your place, covering your sin and your guilt and your condemnation, he gives you hope. By rising from a grave to live and never die again, he gives you hope that you have risen to new life in Christ and will one day rise from your grave, never to die again. On the edge of wilderness, in a dry, arid land there is fresh, vibrant, abundant hope. Your hope. My hope. The world's hope.

We know the rest of the story. We know that those Jewish leaders did not find in Jesus hope—that is why they killed him under Pontius Pilate. We know many people who are looking for a reason to hope. Especially around this time of year we know many people feel as though they are living in a drought of sorts. A drought of joy. A drought of happiness. Perhaps it is because many people lack true hope. Many people today also reject the hope that is found in our Lord.

The world asks us at this time of year to have a spirit of joy and happiness. But for many people this is a tough time. For many people Christmas is difficult. For people who are experiencing their first Christmas after the death of a spouse or relative, it is hard for them to be joyful and happy. But I would like to suggest that it is still possible to have hope.

We learn from John the Baptist that hope comes in the midst of a drought. A message of hope is even found on the edge of the wilderness of our lives. Our Lord Jesus meets us even there. And he brings forgiveness. He brings eternal life. He brings reconciliation. He brings restoration. He brings true hope. Hope that leads us to take action. To pray for others. To listen to others. To share Christ and the hope he brings with others. Hope that leads us to look for the resurrection of the dead and Christ's return when God finally ushers in the fullness of what he has promised. On Sunday morning, December 14 we all have a reason to hope. Praise be to God! Amen.

