

“A Prayer from the Pit”

Isaiah 64:1-9

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I love the theme of this first Sunday in Advent. Hope. Hope has been the wind that fills my sails. Hope has been my daily bread. Hope comes to me from hanging around farmers who, every spring, turn over the soil and plant the seeds and wait for the gentle rains. Farmers live by hope.

Hope comes to me from hanging around people in recovery, people who have hit the bottom of the proverbial pit and have learned that their sobriety hinges on holding fast to hope. If you're in a 12 step program, you are living by hope.

Hope has come to me by hanging around people who have the audacity to believe that somehow God will provide what they can not provide for themselves. My sister, Debbie, was like that. Living all her life with a bi-polar diagnosis, sometimes catatonic, sometimes off the wall, there were dozens of basic things she could simply not provide for herself. Yet, she held on to this child-like hope that if she treated others the way she hoped to be treated, then somehow things would work out.

She always lived in section eight housing in cities such as Holyoke or Chicopee or Springfield. The word would get out to the homeless community that if they needed a bathroom or some hot water or a place to lay their head for a nap, Debbie's door would be open. She had this way of being a ray of hope for someone worse off than herself. Hope was like her middle name. When there was no tangible reason to remain hopeful, she did.

To live with hope is to live knowing that a new day is about to dawn. To live with hope is knowing that life is a precious gift from God. To live with hope is knowing that regardless of how bleak one's life has become, a light does shine in the darkness.

I am very moved by the passage for today from the Prophet Isaiah. His life and the lives of his neighbors have reached the pit. Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. He laments, "We have all become like one who is unclean." He's feeling abandoned. He feels like a soiled rag, like a leaf that has fallen and lost its usefulness. His hope is nearly extinguished.

That is when he begins to pray as he has never prayed before. His body takes on the posture of one who is pleading. His voice finds an uncanny boldness. He prays from that last ounce of hopefulness, calling on God to be God. "We are the clay! You are the potter! Do something! After all, we are your children!" Isaiah can not turn things around by his own power. He sees he is only the clay. He sees God is the potter. His hope relies on God doing what he can not do for himself. And this, of course, marks the dawning of a new day for the prophet and his neighbors.

I tell you, when even one person chooses to live by hope, the pit no longer feels like a dungeon; it feels like a launching pad. It no longer feels like a dead end street; it feels like a U-turn, a new beginning in a new direction!

When we come around each year to Advent, the days grow shorter; the nights grow longer; the darkness seems to prevail. But out there somewhere in the darkness, behind the inn with the no vacancy sign, somewhere off the beaten track in Bethlehem of Judea, a young, unmarried woman is about to give birth. The young man to whom she is engaged is standing by her.

They do not know what the future holds. All they really have is a promise. All they really have is a thimble full of hope. And that is enough. That is enough. The birth that changed the world is tended by a midwife named Hope.

Today, I am thanking God for all those farmers, all those people in recovery, all those Debbie Allens, all those people who live by hope, knowing that we are the clay in the hands of an able potter.

One of the best gifts you can give at Christmas time is the letter you will write to those persons who have modeled for you what it means to live with hope.

I have tracked down the mailing address for the person who will receive my letter: Garrison Keillor. Every Saturday night since 1974, from 6:00 until 8:00 on public radio he lets us know that there is a place somewhere out on the prairie where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are all above average. Where is this place, this Lake Wobegon? Garrison Keillor has helped me to see that this mythical place is found in my heart, in your heart, in all our hearts. It's the place where hope abounds. I understand this is his final season hosting the Prairie Home Companion. I will grieve this loss because I have come to count on this storyteller to remind me week after week that what lifts any of us up and out of the pit is the simple hope that God is real.

That's what I wanted to share with the church on this first Sunday in Advent. In the greatest of hope, I say...Amen!