

“In the Greatest of Hope”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

One of my moments of great dread came on the eve of my Old Testament final exam in my freshman year at Trinity University in 1965. This was years before I had any hint of ever attending a seminary and heading for the ministry! I stared at each page in that college textbook and I remember as clearly as if it had happened last night saying out loud, “I wish I knew more about Isaiah.” That statement turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. I didn’t do to well on the exam!

But since that time I have gotten well acquainted with this prophet who lived 600 years before the birth of Christ. I’ve hit it off with him on a personal basis! It seems that we both live our lives in the greatest of hope!

Had Isaiah had access to a television set at 6:00 every evening, he would have heard news reports of violence along the borders, threats of violence from foreign heads of government, and video footage of casualties along the roads in the northern part of the kingdom. He would have turned off his TV and looked out the window in search of alternate images, images of hope.

And what he sees through the eyes of his imagination is a wolf and a lamb lying down together sharing a good laugh. What he perceives is a cow and a bear walking arm in arm talking about the blueberry harvest. What he detects is a leopard and a young goat cooking up a supper that will consist of rice and beans. Though there is violence all around him, he is able to see past it to the signs of hope. He operates in the greatest of hope! That makes us soul brothers.

Before I die, I'd like to re-enroll at Trinity University, take that Old Testament 101 class over again with Dr. Hayes and maybe get a B plus or an A this time instead of a D minus!

When one of our sons graduated from Elon College in North Carolina, I was pleased to see that each graduate received an eight inch oak sapling carefully wrapped in a lump of earth. Elon in Hebrew language means oak. So, we transported that southern oak to 70 Homestead Drive where we watered it, cultivated it, raked around it, occasionally sang to it the Elon College fight song! It flourished for the next eight years, but last spring I could see that it had not survived the previous winter. The Elon oak had perished. I proceeded to ignore it for a number of weeks and months! Then, I found my bow saw and headed out to the front lawn to cut it down. But what to my wondering eyes did appear...several shoots shooting up all around the dead trunk! Somewhere down in that root system there is life! I tell you, Isaiah and I are brothers!

For me it's a shoot from the trunk of Elon!
For Isaiah it's a shoot from the stump of Jesse!

To live in hope is to have confidence that God will be God; that is, that God will nurture life even when it seems there is no sign of life.

There is a memorable scene in James Michener's great novel, Centennial, set along the Platte River in 1876, a scene that comes to mind now. A young, ambitious dry good salesman had arrived on the prairie in Colorado to set up shop. At first, things had gone well. Trading was brisk and family life prospered. But one thing after another went sour. He lost everything. As winter set in, he found his way into a cave where he planned to fall asleep and never wake up. In the bitter cold temperatures, his heart rate slowed down, his body fat wasted away, his muscles deteriorated, his organs began to shut down. Death was imminent.

Then, along came this Indian woman named Clay Basket. Seeing the man with hardly a breath left in his lungs, she began to care for him, for his body and his soul. She covered him with a warm buffalo robe, built a fire to heat water for tea, rubbed his hands, stroked his hair, bathed his forehead, sang the ancient prayer songs, day by day brought the basic understanding that where there is life there is hope. You can check this book out of the Welles Turner Library and read for yourself how it turns out. But I can tell you that for me Clay Basket is a picture of the power of hope. I am sure she had never heard of Isaiah the prophet or of Jesus the Christ. But she understood a great deal about being an instrument of hope.

In the season of Advent, something mystical happens to church people. I can't define it, but I know it when I see it! It's as if we have all received an invitation in the mail, an invitation that has only two words: Be Hopeful. And I don't know why it is, but lots of people say YES to this invitation. We sing that ancient carol, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight," and we actually believe it. We believe Clay Basket still lives. We believe she lives in us. We believe she still finds her way to those dark caves where life hangs on by a bare thread. For these weeks of Advent, we believe we can be the vessels of God's hope in the world!

Isaiah and I are like those old 33 1/3 rpm records that would inevitably get a scratch between the grooves of molded vinyl. Remember those? The needle would get stuck and we'd hear the same phrase repeated over and over until someone got up and lifted the needle. Isaiah and I are like that old stuck record. We keep on living in the greatest of hope, in the greatest of hope, in the greatest of hope. One of our Elvis Presley records got stuck on the phrase, "I'm itching like a man on a fuzzy tree, I'm in love, I'm all shook up. I'm all shook up. I'm all shook up."

A very good place to be stuck is on that phrase in Isaiah's prophecy where it sings, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

Recently, I attended a production of "The Me Nobody Knows" featuring a cast of Glastonbury youth. In this musical drama, the singers name lots of ways we hurt ourselves and hurt each other. But they also sing prophetically, calling the world to stop the hurting, to stop the judgmental thinking, to stop the excluding. I came away believing the cast members themselves had been transformed, had become themselves the vessels of hope. I was very pleased and surprised to turn a page in the playbill and see an ad paid for by the Congregational Church in South Glastonbury!

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Sisters and brothers, this is why I live as I do....in the greatest of hope! Amen!