

Sunday, December 11, 2011  
Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11  
Psalm 126  
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24  
John 1:6–8, 19–28  
Year B

I.N.I.

"Hope"

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune--without the words,  
And never stops at all,*

*And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.*  
--Emily Dickinson

If I could bottle up hope and sell it, I'd be a rich man.

Here in the (already) third Sunday in Advent, hope is uncorked. Like Aladdin releasing the genie cooped up for eons, anticipation seeps out from prophet, psalmist, apostle, and gospel teller alike.

Isaiah spoke to the exiles returned to Jerusalem. Structures once fit for habitation were either ransacked or crumbling stones. People who remembered the gift of the promised land and the glory days of David were allowed the right of return, and now back at last, the place was a mess.

Like a street vendor on the corner, Isaiah's prophecy sounds like this:

"Feeling oppressed? There's good news for you!"

"Had your heart broken? You will be wrapped up and mended in no time."

"Locked behind bars? You're free!"

"It's Jubilee all over again, where long-standing debts are forgiven."

“So the buildings are crumbling, people are shrouded in mourning clothes, cities lie in ruins, and families are scattered. It’s a time of rebuilding, joy, and homecoming.”

“We will wear party hats instead of black bands.”

“We will dress for a wedding instead of a funeral.”

“We will stuff acorns in the ground and call them oak trees.”

Even with evidence to the contrary, hope is the thing.

It’s not wishful thinking, hope. It is not a pipe dream. Hope is a stance against powers and principalities.

Hope was the thing on a rainy Tuesday night last week in New Haven through a march of about a thousand who cried out like the prophet in the ruins of Jerusalem: for justice, safe streets, jobs with living wages and health care as a human right. This was Advent activity in the city, making room for restoration to a troubled world.

We pray for the coming of Christ, and we act as if we expect him to come. It’s a dangerous and wonderful proposition. While politicians pollute with rhetoric and inaction, we breathe hope in and out like oxygen. While isolation envelops pockets of humanity in Syria and Israel, and needless killing continues, we proclaim Jesus as the light of the world.

John the Baptizer was a witness to hope. He deftly deflected being fingered as the source of hope by saying when questioned “no,” “nope,” “I am not.” And when confronted about his true identity by those who wondered, who were looking for the way through the rubble, who scrutinized him up and down, he answered “I am the voice.” “I am the voice crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.

While Rome now occupied Jerusalem, John pointed to restoration in God’s promised future, coming after him. The Gospel is all about shedding light on God in Christ, and John is but a mere warm-up act for the fire and light show to follow in Jesus.

If I could fly us all to France, I would take you to the Musée d’Unterlinden in Colmar to see the Isenheim altarpiece. A multimedia painting on multiple panels that fold and unfold to reveal images of saints and Christ, it is the work of Reformation era artist Matthias Grünewald, a contemporary of Martin Luther.

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/grunewald/crucifixion/crucifixion.jpg>

Standing by Christ splayed out on the cross, gruesome body scantily clad, is the disciple whom Jesus loved cradling an ashen virgin Mary on his right, while Mary Magdalene kneels with hands clasped. And on his left is John the Baptist, draped in a ragged robe and holding an open book. Below him is a lamb (the Lamb of God) cradling a cross, blood in a single stream filling a chalice underneath. John’s face is rather blasé, and he looks rather Teutonic. The main feature

the viewer's eye is drawn to, the thing all out of proportion to the rest of this artistic witness to the Savior of the world, is John's bony, long finger, extended toward the cross, connected to a rather large hand, and an exposed arm contoured around the elbow. And the words written in background behind John, are printed these words from John's mouth in John's Gospel: *illum oportet crescere, me autem minui*. **He must increase, but I must decrease.**

The days now are almost at their darkest. The sun will be out only a short time on the winter solstice, December 22. From that time onward through June, gradually, as winter drags on and it seems as if Spring will never come, the days grow brighter.

Here in these dark December days we stand with John and point to Jesus who came, who comes, and who will come again. We sing carols about God's promise coming in flesh and blood to redeem humanity. Today, with Jeanne and Ian Bjorkman, assisted by Bethesda Youth, we prepare to feed hungry men at a shelter to announce that God will fill the hungry with good things. Tonight at Bethesda in an opera that is part of our concert series, we will hear from the character Amahl how he can offer his gift to the Christ Child, and are invited to donate toward Life Shelter, a safe place for pregnant women without a place to live. On Wednesday evenings in prayer, we are learning about the ELCA World Hunger appeal which funds new Americans like the Kafley family from Bhutan, sponsored by a Lutheran Church in suburban Chicago. Mr. Kafley says about his new life "I am reborn. I am like a baby learning to live all over again. I am grateful for the Lutheran Church."

Like John in Grünewald's altarpiece, we point to Christ. Like John in the Gospel, we are the voice that cries out, "make straight the way of the Lord."

On this the third Sunday in Advent, while we wait, we look for God who will turn the world upside down. We see righteousness and peace kiss each other. We tap into the world's longing and expectation and with prophets of old and Jesus bursting onto the scene we breathe words and actions that say "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Hope is the thing, isn't it?

I.N.I.