

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, IN 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
December 2, 2018**

“Hope for the World”
Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16

From her advent devotional, “Night Visions” Jan Richardson writes, “A seed in the ground. A flame in the darkness. A hand outstretched. A child in the womb. Hope starts small and overtakes us, stretching the borders of what we have known. One ‘yes’ to an angle and Mary becomes a revolutionary. Mary pours out a song, a cry of hope that echoes the one raised by her foremother Hannah after giving birth to Samuel. The powerful brought down from their thrones! The lowly raised up! The hungry filled with good things! The rich sent away empty!”

“Hope starts small, even as a seed in the womb, but it feeds on outrageous possibilities. It beckons us to step out with the belief that the action we take will not only bear fruit, but that in taking it, we have already made a difference in the world.”

Today we begin our Advent journey. Our destination is in sight, but our task along the way is to be patient, to walk slowly, to be attentive to the signs along the way. This morning we begin with the search for hope. Let us begin with prayer:

Lord Jesus, Master of both light and darkness, send your Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice every day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking light. To you we say, “Come Lord Jesus.” Amen.

Hoosier author Scott Russell Sanders was on a camping trip with his son. It was supposed to be a time of father/son bonding. But it often deteriorated into disagreements. Finally it all came to a head. Sanders asked his son why things were so tense. With reluctance he explained that his father was too pessimistic. He said, “Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out. You make me feel the planet’s dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it. There’s no room for hope. Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can’t. I’ve got a lot of living still to do. I have to believe there’s a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what’s the point?”

Sanders noted that this matched what he was hearing from the college students he taught. They were aware that we were facing environmental crises. They knew that there was turmoil all around. But they wanted to know that there was hope, that there was reason to believe that things could change. The conversation with his son and his students prompted Sanders to write the book, “Hunting for Hope” which was written twenty years ago. In it he explores the moments of hope that sustain his spirit and help him believe that things can turn around.

Twenty years later, we might look around and question whether things have indeed improved. The recent Federal Government Assessment on Climate Change poses some very ominous signs. The Southwest portions of the United States have seen record heat in five of the last six years. In the West, forest fires have doubled in the past generation. Ten million acres of forests burned in 2015. In the Heartland, droughts have accounted for billions of dollars in losses of crops and agriculture. In 2012 that figure was more than \$33 billion. The report indicates that the Ogallala aquifer, which runs from North Dakota to Texas, an area which accounts for twenty percent of America's corn, cotton and wheat, is in danger. In the South and Southeast, rising tides and increased flooding, have resulted in ongoing damage to coastal cities. These are not hypotheticals. These are the facts. Last year the United States suffered \$300 billion in damages from weather related disasters, a 40% increase from the previous year. And these are just the national statistics. World-wide the results of climate change are producing similar occurrences.

And beyond the climate, one glance at the evening news makes one wonder if there is any reason to be hopeful. Estimates are that 85,000 children have died in the civil war in Yemen. One sees the once beautiful cities in Syria that are now rubble. There are refugees all around the world, fleeing war torn and dangerous places because if they stay there, they will die. They want what any of us would want, a safe place to raise their families. But often they are greeted not with kindness but with hostility.

I could continue to point to the darkness in our world, but that is not the point of this sermon. We know the darkness is there. What we long for this morning is a bit of light that can restore our hope and give us reason to believe that we can keep going forward.

In his powerful book, "Man's Search for Meaning" Viktor Frankl recounts his experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. He was one of the fortunate ones to survive. While there, however, he could actually tell when someone gave up hope. They would become quiet, smoke the last cigarette they had been hiding, ignore the threats and blows they faced. These were signs that they had lost hope. And typically they would die soon thereafter.

By the same token, however, he noted that little gifts might be enough to help a person maintain hope for one more day. He writes about the folks who served up the soup for that they would eat. While everyone received the same thin soup for a meal, sometimes when someone was looking very gaunt, the server would dip the ladle deep into the soup pot, down to the bottom where there might be one small pea or a bit of celery. And that little bit of kindness would be enough to help the person keep going.

Hope is like that. We cannot live without it. And one small morsel of hope might be all it takes to see us through for one more day.

Neil Gaiman has an inspiring short story about a homeless woman living on the streets. She encounters a woman who looks familiar but at first cannot place where she knows her from. Then it occurs to her. This is her future self. Her future self assures her that things are going to get better. She hasn't yet met the people who will help her make the changes she needs, but she will soon. The future self encourages her to not do anything to harm herself, promising that things are going to get better. This isn't enough for the homeless woman. She wants things to get better now. She wants her future self to give her food, shelter, money...anything that will

make it better now. But her future self cannot do this. All she can do is give her the hope that things will improve. And with that she vanishes.

The homeless woman is walking to the train station, thinking about suicide when she looks down and finds a crumpled dollar bill. It will be enough to help her that day and she makes the decision to keep going forward. She begins to believe that her future self may be right, things will get better.

That is what hope does for us. It doesn't fix things right away. But it is like digging down into the pot of soup and scooping up one morsel of food that tells us that it will be ok. We don't know what it will look like or how it will turn out, but it gives us the reason to keep believing and working for that better day.

Advent is like that. Advent is filled with messages from prophets whose names we barely know...Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Zechariah, Micah and others who dare to look into the darkness that is all around and pronounce a message of comfort and hope. It is in those dark places that we find that promise and the reassurance that keeps us moving forward. Jeremiah says to an oppressed and struggling people, "The days are coming." He isn't saying that they are here yet, but they are coming. "The days are coming when God will fulfill the promise of justice throughout the land." Judah will be saved and all will live in safety.

He speaks of it like a branch that rises up from what seems to be a dead tree. The main tree has been cut down and it looks like there is no reason for hope. But for those with eyes to see, a little shoot emerges from the trunk. It is the promise of a new beginning. It is hope where once there seemed no hope. That is what Advent offers to us.

My friend and colleague Mike Mather, pastor at Broadway UMC in Indianapolis, has written about a conversation he had with Rev. Charles Villa-Vicencio who worked for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Charles said to him, "We had a joke in South Africa in the eighties. 'There are two possible solutions to our crisis here. One is miraculous, and one is realistic. One solution is that God will send down angels and sort us all out. That's the realistic solution. The miraculous one is that we will sit down and talk with our enemies.'"

I believe that Advent is a season that invites us to see the places where hope is planted all around us. A living shoot that emerges from the stump of a tree, a flower that blooms in the desert, two enemies that make peace with one another. These images restore our hope to keep doing the things we do that will make a difference. God puts the hopeful images there to invite us to keep doing the things we are doing.

Right now, there are people in Kenya who have planted more than a million trees over the last decade to heal the land and reduce erosion. It is called the Green Belt movement and they are healing the planet one tree at a time. Right now there are people in Syria who rush to the scene anytime there is a mortar explosion. They put themselves in harm's way to rescue innocent people trapped in collapsed buildings. They call themselves the White Hats because they are easily identified by the helmets they wear when they rush into the rubble. They are making difference to save innocent lives. Right now there are people volunteering their time and resources to feed the victims of the destructive fires in California. Amid the loss and grief they are helping people find stability that will enable them to begin to rebuild their lives.

It is happening here and all around the world. Inspired by the images of hope, they believe in the possibility that their actions can make a difference. Amid the darkness that we experience and witness all around the world, may God inspire us to embody hope and to act in ways that make the world a better place. May we always be a people of hope.