

## “Hearts full of Hope”

A friend of mine is retired from working as the Communications Director for the American Leprosy Missions. Over the years, I have learned much about this disease which I used to think only existed in the Bible but know from our friendship that it still ravages many people in the world. On this first Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of hope, I would like to share a story that she told me.

One day, while in a leprosy hospital in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, Sue met a farmer named Genetu. He was recovering from hand surgery and had been advised not to return to farming as the wear and tear on his fingers could result in his hands being crippled and even the loss of fingers. He was being discharged that day and had no support system, no money and no skills other than farming. As they talked about his newly straightened hands, Sue, being new to her job and full of enthusiasm and compassion asked him, “What are your dreams for the future?” The translator asked him the question and then chided her gently in English by saying, “He can’t think about that!”

Sue told us that over the next few months she recalled her conversation many times and was humbled and embarrassed at her thoughtlessness. She realized that while her relative health and wealth allowed her to look beyond her next meal, for many people in the world, such hopeful thoughts were impractical and futile.

Six months later, the medical director came into her office to tell her about *his* recent trip to Addis Ababa. “Do you remember Genetu?” he asked. “You interviewed him in the hospital,” he reminded her. She nodded and then he added, “He has a cow.”

Sue was astonished. A single cow can cost hundreds of birr – far beyond the reach of an unemployed farmer. But a cow would enable its owner to make a huge jump up the economic and social ladder. “How can this be?” she asked.

The doctor explained that Genetu had worked out an elaborate plan: going to the farmers’ association for a loan; trading off work with another farmer, and convincing creditors to give him a hand. And this is what he told the doctor: “Someone talked with me many months ago, and she asked me what my dreams were. NO ONE ever asked me that question before. I had never had enough hope to think about a dream for the future. And then I remembered something that I always wanted and I started to think” . . . and he stood proudly as he continued, “I dreamed of having a cow.”

Her story reminded me how important it is for all of us to have something to hope for, something to believe in. And hope is what Matthew is trying to bring to the people of God as he recalls Jesus’ words about remaining faithful. You see, before Jesus died, he made a promise, “This generation will certainly not pass away until I come again.” Now since most scholars believe that Matthew was not written until at least forty years after Jesus’ death, this means that people had been waiting for a long time! And I am sure that many of them were about ready to give up.

Truthfully, the climate of times for Christians and Jews alike was not very hopeful. Jerusalem had been destroyed by Titus while putting down a Jewish rebellion. The Promised Land was a province of the Roman Empire. And since many people who actually knew Jesus themselves were dying off *without* fulfillment of the promise, Matthew wanted to record Jesus’ words so that those remaining could continue to wait in hope.

So you might be thinking one of two things right now. Either this text is really HOPELESS because we are STILL waiting *or* Jesus was not telling the truth because thousands of years have passed and he has not come back. But let me challenge you to consider that God does not operate on the same timeframe that we do.

After all, one might ask similar questions about the promise made by God through the prophet Isaiah. He told the waiting Jews, “The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” He said that swords would turn into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, indicating that their tools of destruction would be changed to tools that provide and that Jerusalem would be a haven of peace. Yet, today, there is still no peace in the Holy Land. And all over the world, even right here in our own community, division and hate are prevalent in many ways. So what exactly *are* we to think and how can we find hope in this story at all?

One message of hope is found in Jesus’ reminder about Noah. By doing this Jesus reminds us that the divine has a history of invading the mundane. Think about it! People were eating, drinking, marrying, working in the field, doing laundry, driving to work, watching the game - nothing is off limits for the Lord's arrival. Then without warning - the flood washed everything away. With them in it!

But today, we are not like that. Because we have been warned and we KNOW what to expect. Unlike the people who heard Jesus’ original words, we know that the baby in the manger was born beneath the shadow of the cross, making the Kingdom of God a reality. And unlike the waiting Christians of Matthew’s day who were the first generation to read the promise, we know that God’s timing and ours are not the same.

What may seem like a generation to us may be only an instant to God. It seems that God doesn't have a smartphone with an alarm on it!

And perhaps this, in and of itself, is the real message of hope. Because if God's time were the same as our time, we might never bother to have dreams. We would be like Genetu before he met Sue. Maybe the delay of Jesus' second coming is a time of grace, enabling more people to have a chance to hear and accept the Gospel. Maybe it is the gift of time that God is giving Zion to become the city that His Word intended it to be? Maybe God is not coming because he wants more hearts to be ready.

When thinking about the fulfillment of God's promises, I think one of the most hopeful verses in the Bible is found in Romans 11. This passage deals with the Jews' rejection of Christ. God says that when the FULL NUMBER OF GENTILES HAS COME IN, then all of Israel will be saved. And friends, our hope is found in that the full number is God's number and we have no idea what that is. But apparently, God is using this time of waiting to bring more and more people to Him.

So while we are waiting on God's time, this is THE time that we DO have to make things right with God in our own hearts and our own lives. Time to call someone and tell them we love them. To forgive or to forget or to get it right. We are post-flood babies who know and believe that God is God and will do as he pleases and not what or when it is convenient for us! And friends, that is a true message of hope.

Yet our hopelessness sometimes sets in because we cannot see the calendar that is hanging up in God's office! This makes us anxious and causes us think about how we can get God to conform to our idea of what the right time is.

When I first started serving as Chaplain at the Presbyterian Community, I assumed – mistakenly – that the pastor would be the most important person there. I found out quickly how wrong I was – it is the beautician! These ladies in their 80's and 90's have been getting their hair done on a certain day for decades and nothing will change their plan.

One particular lady, who lived to be 102, was so upset that I had weekly devotions at the same time that she got her hair done. Yet Friday at 1:30 had been her time for years and she was NOT going to change. She used to say, "I guess I will just *have* to choose the beauty parlor because if Jesus comes again, I want my hair to look nice." And I would say, "It's okay Miss Lib, just leave a note for him on your pillow that says 'In the beauty parlor until 3:00, please come back.'"

But we all know that things will not work that way. God will not wait for you to get your house in order. No, Jesus tells us that God's arrival will be like a second rate criminal with a long rap sheet. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "He will come like a thief in the night, with a wool cap pulled down low on his head and socks on his feet so that you do not even know he is there until you wake up to the sound of someone breathing over you in your bed."

But the GOOD news of Advent is that when this thief comes, he is not coming after our silverware or our computers or our great-grandmother's cameo pin. No, he is coming after something very different and much more important. He is coming after our hearts! So Matthew says that it is more important to accept the truth and prepare our hearts than it is to calculate the time.

When Sue asked Genetu about his dreams, what happened was that she lit a spark in his heart of what a future with hope could look like. And friends, it is my prayer for everyone here that as Gayle and Jane lit the first Advent candle, a similar spark took hold in our hearts. Because while we may or may not suffer from a debilitating disease, every person here has some conflict to deal with. Some hard choice to make. Everyone here has experienced sadness or disappointment. Everyone here knows someone who is struggling with change, or addiction or oppression or worry and we need hope just as much as Genetu did.

So I pray that seeing the candles lit each week will be more than just a meaningless tradition. May the light of each candle represent the growing hope that we can experience as we wait for the Christ child to come once again into our lives and our hearts.

And while most of us enjoy decorating and shopping and singing and receiving cards, as Christians, it is important to remember that when the thief comes after your heart and soul and mind, he will not care whether your door has a wreath on it or what your hair looks like. God only cares whether or not you will recognize him when he gets here. Perhaps God is postponing his return until he is sure that when you see him you will not resist him but will welcome him in.

So the message from Jesus is the same today as it was to the early Christians. Keep awake because a wonderful intruder is coming into your heart and mine. Remember his coming into the world as a baby once before. Remember that he dwelt among us and that he promises to come again.

You see, whether we are hoping for a cow, like Genetu, or the healing of a friend or the arrival of a loved one or peace on earth or the wholeness of creation, we can either choose to believe that God is coming again or that he is not. And I for one choose to believe.

God is coming. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. So let us prepare for his coming by cleaning out our hearts and unlocking the chains of unforgiveness or resentment or anxiety that bind it. And as we remember and wait with expectation, our lives can be hopeful of the things we only dare to dream of. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.