

The Next Right Thing – Advent 1
December 1, 2024
Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 40:1-11

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

² *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

³ *A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

⁵ *Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

⁶ *A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said,^[a] "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass;
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

⁷ *The grass withers; the flower fades,
[[when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

⁸ *The grass withers; the flower fades,]]^[b]
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

⁹ *Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;^[c]
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;^[d]
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*

¹⁰ *See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him
and his recompense before him.*

¹¹ *He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms
and carry them in his bosom
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Mark 1:1-15

The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ.^[b]

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
who will prepare your way,

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

⁴ so John the baptizer appeared^[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with^[f] water, but he will baptize you with^[g] the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^[h] with you I am well pleased.”

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news^[i] of^[j] God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[k] repent, and believe in the good news.”^[l]

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

A few days after the election, author and social scientist, Brene Brown described her feelings about hope and despair on social media. She said this about despair: *Despair is a claustrophobic feeling. It’s the emotion that says, “Nothing will ever change.” It’s different than anger or sadness or grief. Despair is tinged with hopelessness...* I thought for a minute about her use of the word “claustrophobic.” It is claustrophobic, isn’t it? When you are in despair, you feel trapped, there is no way forward, no way out. You’re stuck and it’s hard to breathe. I’d say claustrophobic pretty well sums it up.

“Hope,” says Brown, “is a powerful antidote to despair.” The word “hope” is derived from the Old English word “hopa” which means “confidence in the future.” But Brene Brown admits she doesn’t have much confidence right now. In her post she says, “I have no access to big hope right now...” She goes on to say, “Right now, the thing that is helping me the most is micro-dosing on hope.” In other words, she has shifted from big hopes to little, even tiny, even micro hopes.

What are our big hopes? Do we have any?

Week after week we try to imagine the big hope of the kingdom of God. We try to imagine a world where love rules, and justice reigns. We try to imagine a world without suffering and exploitation. We try to imagine a world where creation thrives. We try to imagine the world Jesus to which Jesus points and leads us...but...then we read the news. We hear the latest from climate scientists. We have no idea what the consequences from this election will be, but there is talk of higher prices, mass deportations, the

restriction of women's rights over their bodies, and programs cut for the most vulnerable. If the kingdom of God is our big hope, I understand how it is hard to access right now. I understand how close many people are to despair.

And yet, we can “micro-dose” on hope as a way of moving forward. We can have little hopes, and little goals, to keep the walls from closing in on us. For Brene Brown that means, staying, *“committed to courage, kindness, and caring for others regardless of the choices made by others.”*

Hope is more than wishful thinking. And hope has nothing to do with denying reality. Hope is a powerful force that contributes greatly to our outlook and well-being. It is now studied as a cognitive behavioral process. Richard Snyder coined the phrase “Hope Theory” for his research on hope. Snyder defines hope as the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (your agency) and ways to achieve those goals (called pathways.) Goals must be achievable – but not so easy they lack meaning or value. Our big hope for the kingdom may guide our thinking and behavior, but if it seems out of reach or impossible, it can start to make us feel powerless and possibly stuck.

So maybe the kingdom of God is too big right now. Maybe we need more achievable goals right now. What are some little goals can we imagine and how can we achieve them. Maybe it is a daily gratitude practice. Maybe it is a goal to grow your heart's capacity for love and compassion. Maybe it's a goal to learn more about the pervasiveness of racism. Maybe it is a commitment to be a better friend or spouse. Maybe it is a goal to take better care of yourself. Little goals can help us micro-dose on hope and give us the resilience to resist despair. And when we set little goals – when we have little hopes – we can figure out ways to achieve them that are within our control.

When legendary mental performance coach Peter Jensen, who has worked with more than 100 Olympic medalists, starts working with a new athlete, he pulls out a blank sheet of paper. In the top right corner, he writes their big hope — for example “qualify for the 2024 Olympic Games.” In the bottom left corner, he writes their current status — for example “fifth at Nationals.” He then draws a diagonal line from bottom left corner to the top right corner and, working with the athlete, starts to plot out their pathway on the timeline. Critical markers like “Olympic trials” and “National championships” go on first. They continue working backwards, until they arrive at a simple question: “What's the next best step?”¹

Our reading from Isaiah is for people who are feeling that claustrophobic feeling of despair. It begins with words of comfort. *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”* They have been living in exile. They are stuck in a dark place, disconnected from God and each other. The good news that Isaiah announces to them is that they have a future – there is a way forward - and the next right thing to do is to prepare the way. In the wilderness of despair, he invites them to imagine a pathway for God. He instructs them to start thinking about the next right thing that will lead them to the future God imagines for them.

Our gospel reading is from the Book of Mark. Mark doesn't have a birth story for Jesus – no wisemen – no angels. He begins his gospel with John the Baptist. And once again we hear those words from Isaiah. John is the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. For John the next right thing to do is to repent and be baptized – to turn to God and God's ways. And he points to Jesus to show us the way. And even though the kingdom of God that Jesus come to proclaim is a big hope – Jesus gives us a pathway to follow – a pathway of next right things. He gives us micro-doses of hope. He invites us to love our neighbor, even the one who voted differently from you. He teaches us to welcome all to the

¹ <https://hbr.org/2022/03/sustaining-hope-in-uncertain-times>

table and not to judge. He instructs us to serve one another as he washes his disciples' feet. He teaches us to feel compassion for those who are vulnerable and stuck and invisible to so many. He gives voice to radical love and grace. He even shows us that such love can be risky and costly. Each teaching can be an attainable goal for us. We may not be able to bring about the kingdom, but we can most certainly take the next right step.

American historian and playwright, Howard Zinn said this: "What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."²

For us, the pathway Jesus carved is that diagonal line from where we are right now – to the kingdom of God. And we know it isn't a straight line. And we know there will be obstacles, and detours, and times of discouragement. We might even be tempted to cave into despair. But we have cause for hope. There is always a next right thing we can do. We can live in defiance of all that is bad and hurtful around us. We can be *"committed to courage, kindness, and caring for others regardless of the choices made by others."* We can micro-dose on hope. We can do the next right thing.

² Howard Zinn, "You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train"