

Signs of Hope: Love  
Isaiah 9: 2-7, Romans 13: 11-14  
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This weekend, my family put up our Christmas tree. Full disclosure – ours is fake. And we had a fake tree growing up, too – when I was a kid, a doctor thought that my seasonal allergies might mean that I was allergic to pine. Even though we eliminated pine as the allergy culprit, my mom was hooked on a tree that didn't shed needles and need to be disposed of promptly by January 1. We got a fake tree and never looked back. So as long as I can remember, Christmas decorating has begun by assembling a tree from a big bin of branches. *There's a certain amount of comfort in this familiar ritual.*

And then there's the requisite untangling of the Christmas lights, followed by the mandatory trip to the CVS to buy new strings to replace those that we purchased last year and yet NO LONGER WORK!?! And yet, as I dispatched my husband to purchase the lights, as I always do, *there was a certain amount of comfort in this familiar ritual.*

And then the ornaments. Box after box. Removing the delicate stars and angels from their tissue paper and handing the stuffed penguins and hedgehogs to the kids to place on the tree. In our home, each ornament tells a story – some were handmade when I was a child...others handmade by my own children. I like to tell **each and every** story. My children like to maintain interest for about 8 seconds and then retreat to their Pokemon cards. My husband likes to sit by the fire with a scotch, but will listen patiently to every story. And, again, *there is a certain amount of comfort in this familiar ritual.*

Yep – it's pretty predictable. In good years and bad – in years where we have gained much or lost someone dear, we still engage in the same familiar rituals. I imagine that your family has its own traditions. No matter what it is that's important to you – familiar foods, decorations, music – we all have traditions that mark the weeks leading up to Christmas.

There's a certain comfort in these familiar actions. There's a certain comfort in the familiar stories of Advent and Christmas. Year after year, we prepare for Christmas and the coming of this child – this Wonderful Counselor...this Prince of Peace. We can allow the familiarity of these words to lull us. And we can, if we choose, allow the familiar re-telling of the story to wash over us. And, as we hear the story of Jesus that will unfold over the next four weeks, we can allow it's familiarity to make it seem quaint or nostalgic.

Or, we can hear in these familiar words a new challenge – and be open to a new sense of hope. I don't know about you, but I feel like that's what I need this year: an active hope, not a passive “wishing and hoping” kind, but a hope that is so securely rooted in God's love that it allows me – and all of us – to boldly live into God's hopes for our world.

This past season has been hard. If it hasn't been difficult for you, I'm glad to hear it! But as I hear from others, I sense that a lot of us are weary. It may be that you've experienced a personal loss, or because you're worried about what's going on in the world, in our country, or even in our church.

Like us, the people to whom Isaiah speaks also live in challenging times. War is imminent. They are surrounded by enemies. Again and again, Isaiah implores their leader – King Ahaz – to trust in God, promising that God will help them. Several times, Isaiah promises the king a sign from God – and each time, the sign is the same: the birth of a child. First, Isaiah promises that a “young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel,<sup>1</sup>” meaning “God is with us.” And then, Isaiah says, the child is born! And then, Isaiah describes the child in the gorgeous words that our choir just sang: this is a child on whom the spirit of the Lord rests, who will usher in a time of peace<sup>2</sup>. Isaiah knows that God has not given up on them, and as proof, there is a promise of new life and hope, in the form of an infant.

Now, the people who heard Isaiah for the first time would have known that Isaiah was speaking of a new prince, a child born to King Ahaz and his wife -- a baby

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7:14

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 11: 1-9

who would grow up to be King Hezekiah, and who turned out to be a great king<sup>3</sup>. Many Jews who heard the words of Isaiah during the time of Jesus AND Christians who have heard Isaiah's words since hear in them another promise: the promise, of course, of **Jesus**. But Isaiah heard good news RIGHT NOW, not just for the distant future. The birth of a baby is always eventful, isn't it? But here's the thing about babies: they are, well, babies. No matter how wonderful they are – if they are royal or even divine – they can't do much of anything right away. They sleep and cry. They eat and wet themselves (and worse!). And they can't do much of anything without help. They need to be nurtured and cared for. They are helpless.

And this is the hope that God sends into Isaiah's world, AND into our own: tiny and messy and fragile. Full-blown hope isn't "birthed" into the world. Perhaps this is the way that God works – God loves us so much that God will always give us reason to hope. And yet, paradoxically, God loves us so much that God sends hope that still requires some care and feeding.

By sending an "infant" hope, God gives us plenty of work to do. Just as babies require caregivers, so does hope. So how do we see – and nurture – the fragile hopes in our world? For starters, we can look to Isaiah. Isaiah prays, praising God for what God is doing – even though it hasn't happened yet!

"You have multiplied the nation!" Isaiah says.

"You have increased (our) joy!" he continues.

Even though this new king hasn't accomplished anything, let alone a lasting peace, Isaiah praises God joyfully. There's an urgency in Isaiah's words. He's not going to wait 20-30 years for this little one to ascend the throne.

Hundreds of years later, Paul encourages the church in Rome with a similar urgency – "Wake up," he says – live in the light now! Paul doesn't say this because things are going particularly well for him – every day that he follows Jesus brings him closer to his eventual death. But Paul feels Jesus' salvation, and he tells his readers to respond immediately, telling them, "Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

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<sup>3</sup> Holbert, John. "Hope Springs Eternal," [patheos.com](http://patheos.com).

What do we see when we look around us? I think that this is an important question during a time when a lot of us are on edge about the political climate in our country. Please understand – I have no desire to talk about the election! But I do think it's helpful to talk about the post-election world in which we live.

I've become convinced that Americans have created a few competing stories, or narratives. And so when we hear what's going on in the world, we seek out stories that support our own narrative. Our media is curated for us – either by the channels to which we subscribe or by the friends who send it to us. There's a certain sense of "I told you so" whenever we find an article that articulates what our gut has already been telling us.

What if, instead, we sought out signs of hope. I'm not suggesting that we bury our heads in the sand or put on rose colored glasses. But what if we choose to see the world through hope-filled glasses? I wonder if we might see some baby-sized hopes in need of our nurture? I want to share a few stories I've encountered recently that gave me reason to hope.

A group of moms at my school got together the week following the election with the desire to focus on ways to engage our children in a more positive climate.

We have our first activity this week – helping to prepare welcome kits for refugee families expected in Chicago this January. Now this might sound like small potatoes, given all the problems in the world, but who knows what can come out of these tiny baby steps.

And so I thought of this when I heard a story from a good friend . Her step-mother had just come back from a reunion dinner with former refugee families. Thirty years ago, her small corner of Savannah, Georgia had been inundated with refugees. The step-mother volunteered to help. She took them shopping and showed them how to choose from among the million and one unfamiliar products. She helped them navigate doctor's offices and utility bills and signing their children up for public schools. I can't imagine how great the language barriers and cultural barriers were, but she stepped up. And 30 years later, when the refugee families reunited, they invited this southern lady who had become part of their

extended family. I don't know about you, but I'd rather nurture this small hope of welcoming refugees and see what God might do with it in the next 30 years.

And I have a lot of hope for the church, as well, and the role that we can play in this current climate. In a Facebook group that I subscribe to, a woman posted that she was too discouraged to go to church the Sunday after the election. You see, she is Indian-American, and in the past few days, she reported, people whom she considered friends had posted some nasty things on her Facebook page, making her feel that she – as a legal immigrant – would not be welcome there.

With dread, I looked down the responses, expecting people to say, “forget church! Who needs it?”

Instead, people rallied: “Don't give up on church!” And then they offered help: “Do you have a friend who can go with you to support you?” “I wish you could come to my church – you would be so welcome!” Despite the fact that this is a huge nation-wide group, I recognized names of former classmates from seminary responding to this woman: “let me know where you live and I might be able to recommend a welcoming church!” I was pleased, I'll admit, to see that a number of people suggested she should seek out a Presbyterian Church, since we are so welcoming!

And I see signs of hope in a very personal connection that my family has made. A few years ago I was fortunate to visit the Faraja School in Tanzania – a school for children with disabilities founded by Dave Tolmie's parents and supported by Dave, Tracy and the whole family. My family has been sponsoring a child there named Amani, and so this weekend I read to my kids a letter that Amani had written to us.

*Dear Mama Amy and family,*

*I greet you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. I hope you are fine. The aim of this letter is to wish you Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! May your life sparkle like that shiny Christmas ball on the tree. My luck and love with wishes are with you. Stay happy and blessed. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year...Amani*

After I read this letter, the kids started asking how long Amani would be at the Faraja School – they wanted to know if they would be old enough to visit the school and meet Amani in person before he graduated. A child’s letter is a simple thing – but who knows what kind of relationships can be formed across the world?

Maybe we need to start asking ourselves, “What Would Isaiah Do?” Isaiah doesn’t say that they will wait until the baby grows up before taking action. Isaiah says that the people will start making signs of peace right now! Isaiah says that all the boots of the tramping warriors....AND all the blood-stained clothes will be burned *as fuel for the fire*. Isaiah wants to start NOW. He wants to respond to this glimmer of hope by permanently destroying the tools of warfare.

Now this might sound hopelessly naïve. But what if we could raise an entire generation of children this way – all those little glimmers of hope? And so I’d like to close with a story from our own congregation.

A few years ago, we were holding a diaper drive for infants whose parents were participating in a substance abuse program just north of here. I explained to the kids, delicately, that the parents were trying to get healthy so that they could care for their kids. In the meantime, we needed to help them out with a few necessities.

One of the kids raised his hand, “it’s pretty tricky” he said. “Because we don’t know if those babies really need the diapers or not.” I recall that I affirmed him for making sure that our charitable giving was supporting those truly in need, but I also reminded him that “babies need diapers, no matter what!” He pushed some more, “but how do we know?”

I responded by talking a little more about the organization we were supporting, how well-run it was, how I had visited there myself and witnessed their programs. He just wasn’t satisfied. And finally, *I realized that I wasn’t going to be able to satisfy him*. I could not provide 100% assurance that there wasn’t one person participating in the program just for the free diapers that they should pay for.

So instead I said this: “We can’t control what other people do. We are only responsible for our own actions. And in here, we are going to choose to do the

generous thing. We are going to choose to do the loving thing. And we are going to choose to do the right thing, whenever we can.”

I remember those words so clearly because they have become a kind of mantra for me and for the work we try to do with the children. Our kids are in Sunday School right now making toiletry kits for the Night Ministry to share with homeless people in Chicago. Yes, it’s possible that there will be someone who receives a toothbrush and toothpaste who doesn’t really need it. But that’s a risk I’m prepared to take. I’d rather raise children to be the change we hope to see in the world.

We can’t hear this story year after year and just let it lull us into believing it’s a quaint and nostalgic tale. Instead, this year, we can let it remind us that we follow a God of hope – bold, audacious hope. But that this hope starts small. So let’s put on our hope-filled glasses this season, and seek a hope as small as a tiny baby, just ready for us to nurture. AMEN.