

We are people of the promise. It's a big, lasting, loving, legendary promise. "I will be your God. I will be with you always. I will grant you rest." The promise is described in a variety of ways - to a wide variety of individuals; and ultimately to all Creation. We claim a share in the covenant promise given to Noah - to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - to Moses...all of the glory and wonder of all of our Scripture has its root in God's promise, restated and renewed and revealed down the years. From Genesis to Jesus, the promise runs unhindered by our stubbornness; untroubled by our lack of faith.

This promise doesn't depend on us to be delivered. The promise doesn't care if we're ready to receive it. The promise is coming - the promise has come! It's here, and there's nothing to do but rejoice at our good fortune!

Well, the rejoicing will come - and this is where Luke's gospel tries to crash the party; first, there will be "signs"...distress - discouragement - fear and foreboding. Signs in the sun and stars - as distinct as the cycle of the seasons. Be ready, says the gospel lesson; don't be distracted. We can escape neither these feelings of dread, nor the redemption that shall accompany all this... reality. All of it is part of the promise - the good with the bad - and you'll know when it's close. As sure as the changing leaves mark the end of summer and the first fresh shoots signal spring's awakening. Luke 21: 25-36. The word of the Lord, and all that.

Jeremiah speaks promise to those long blind to the signs of hope, and Luke's gospel would kindle hope anew in those whose hope had been taken from them by force. Jesus stood as a physical reminder of the ancient promise; the embodiment of hope, enduring and resilient. And by having the symbol of hope speak openly about utter hopelessness, the author of Luke's gospel brings us face to face with ourselves.

For here we are - people of the promise - thousands of generations absent from those who “walked with God”; millions of miles (culturally) from those who sang and sacrificed and lived in good faith according to the law and the promise. Two thousand years removed from the one who carried the promise to the grave and rose again with the promise intact and centuries of hope fulfilled. *Here. We. Are...* waiting, and wondering what the promise holds for us. We are distinctly in the minority. We wonder what will become of us - of our faith - of our dreams. We imagine our hope to be fragile, but it is not. Hope is bound to the promise, and the promise is with us and for us. Our waiting is sharply focused in these four short, wonderful weeks, and that’s what Advent is all about, Charlie Brown.

It is not right that our Advent countdown begins, every three years, with words of doom and dread. We would prefer to isolate December with barriers of joy, peace, and love. We want colour and singing and laughter and goodwill. Christmas is coming, our pantries are full and our wallets are being emptied to ensure that all is well celebrated, but Advent in the church calendar starts - every year - with HOPE; and hope is a state of mind known best by those who first know despair.

Jeremiah, Isaiah and all the ‘minor’ prophets - not to mention Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the rest - they knew something of despair...they were familiar with the pain of loss, and the sharp edge of expectations not met. The history of the faithful is a history of our ability to discover new disappointments, and to recover from them, all on account of hope. We begin our Advent celebrations with HOPE because hope is the most resilient, the most...well - *hopeful* - of all the attitudes of faith.

You might imagine that the opposite is true. We talk easily about hope dashed, lost hope - our list of 'hopeless causes' is apt to be longer than a child's Christmas list. The news of the day seems designed to batter hope into submission and out of existence...but that is an illusion. Hope 'springs eternal'.

Hope is sunshine breaking through clouds, and a rainbow at the end of a storm, and candles in the window when the power is out. Hope is children's laughter and poetry and the tune you can't stop humming. Hope is holding the door open for you when you have your arms full of groceries, and 25 minutes on the parking meter when you're all out of change. Hope is always finding us at our worst and turning those moments upside down, so that we can face the next moment, the next crisis, the next prophet of doom, with something more than casual determination. Hope lets us smile at (or in spite of) the news of the day. Hope lets us believe that death is not the end. And all this because of a promise made in the ancient prehistory of human imagination - in a time when we dared to believe that God may indeed be in our midst.

This is the season when we most fully inhabit that ancient promise, of which we are both heirs and stewards. The story of the promise will unfold in song and story. We will act it out around tables and it will lie waiting, brightly wrapped, beneath Christmas trees. The promise of presence is at the heart of our December celebrations, and today, we begin those celebrations with hope - not that we have 'done enough to be worthy of God's promised presence, but that we have wisdom enough to claim the promise - to accept the gift of grace represented by a baby, whose final act inspires hope for all time. Beloved, let us be people of Hope. Amen.