

“The Season of Hope”

A Sermon by The Reverend Bill Clark

I feel it is going to be a cold, cold winter. It’s not that I feel it in any arthritic bones. But snow? On Thanksgiving? I remember hearing this back in the summer – remember that – summer ? I do recall someone saying enjoy it now because; “It’s going to be a cold winter.”

Then again, it is December. It is the time for the cold. It is the month of the winter solstice. It is the time for the cold. The word solstice is derived from two Latin words: sol meaning sun, and sistere, meaning to pause, to stand still. December 21st, will be the day when the sun will seem to stand still and it will be the shortest day of the year or when the night-time hours are at their maximum. As well as a time of the cold when we move into the darkness.

Poet Wendall Berry puts it this way: “To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, And find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, And is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.”

And yet as we enter this time of the darkest season, we also enter what has been called, the season of hope.

For it is easier perhaps to enter the dark, to live with the dark, knowing that the light, the sun will eventually return. In the religions of the natural world often called Pagans, or the earth-centered religions, the return of the sun represents the return of hope. When the sun came back fear receded and hope returns.

In most monotheistic religions the practices and rituals celebrated in the month of December stem from the pagan practices of the solstice. What, in historical time, represents the first glimmer of hope in human events? To Jews, it is the restoration of the worship of the one true God of the universe and the dedication of the temple. This rededication of the Jewish temple happened three days after the dedication to the Pagan Deity, at the time of the solstice. The dedication of the temple is called Hanukah. For Christians, this glimmer of hope is the birth of their savior, Jesus Christ, celebrated at Christmas. Christmas is the birth of light and hope amidst the darkness of

winter. Many of the symbols and practices associated with Christmas are of Pagan origin: holly, ivy, mistletoe, decorated evergreen trees, the giving of gifts.

In the month of December our religious traditions sing this hope. As well as solstice, Hanukah and Christmas, we have Kwanazaa, which honors the profound story of African Americans not only surviving hardships as a people, but triumphing through deeply held values and virtues. Muslims end the fasting month of Ramadan in December when fasting and prayer reconnects them to the hope and source of all goodness. And then we end this season with New Years, when all are invited to evaluate the past year and to enter the new one with hope for the future.

December is truly, the historical and natural, season of hope.

Hope. I do love the word hope. I love the word hope because it says there is a better way. I love the word hope because it says there is a possibility for change. I love the word hope because it says even amidst the darkness there is something. The poet Berry says to know the dark, go dark and find that the dark too blooms and sings. That even in the darkest of times, even in the depths of despair, even when all seems to be lost, there is something that pulls us through.

Rabbi Karen Kedar calls it standing at the edge of my limitations. Standing at the edge of my limitations. Now we have all been there. Come on be honest. We have all been at that place on the edge. Standing there. Waiting. Waiting for an answer. Waiting for a sign. Waiting for courage. Waiting for hope. Just tell me man, what do I do here. What do I do?

And what does the Rabbi tell us? “Rather than cling to the fears, I cling to the image of hang glider. Running on a large plateau, she runs as fast as she can. She does not hesitate or look back or slow down. She reaches the edge of the plateau..... and flies! She flies!!!

I love this image. I love this image for a couple of reasons. I love it first because I have always wanted to fly. I mean truly fly. I have flying dreams all the time. I kind of jump up in the air and begin kind of swimming in the air and just go! I’m sure there is probably some deep psychological analysis of this sort of dream. We just won’t go there today.

I love this image also because it is a she that is running and not looking back. This is a powerful and profound image in our patriarchal dominated society. This, this alone is hope!!

The Rabbi ends this image by saying all I need are the wings of faith. Faith. The Christian scriptures in Hebrews 11, state that faith is “the substance of

things hoped for...”

But must the faculty of hope depend upon faith? To find the answer I turn to a quote by Czech playwright and politician Vaclav Havel. He wrote; “hope is a dimension of the spirit. It is not outside us but within us.” Therefore what distinguishes faith and hope or actually what connects them is a better way of saying it, to me, is that hope lies deep within us. Hope and thus faith is not placing our lives, our hearts and souls into the hands of an unknown and unseen deity. Rather, to me hope and thus faith is that energy, that force, that power deep within us, which brings us to the edge, and then allows us to take the next step into the unknown. Author Claire Morris describes this hope in another way;

“When we go to the edge of all we know and take one step into the darkness of the unknown, one of two things will happen. Either there will be something solid for us to stand on, or we will be taught to fly.”

Again it is this image of flight. And maybe this is what hope is all about. It is about releasing the mind and body of all fears and opening them to the heights that anything and everything is possible.

Reverend William Sloane Coffin says, “Hope arouses as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.” Again, for me, it is the image of the wide open field of possibilities.

But hope also has a sibling. A dangerous sibling, if you will. One that clouds the field of possibilities with promises. This sibling is called expectation. In American Sign Language the signs for hope and expectations are closely related. Hope (show sign). Expectation (show sign). With hope the palms face one another, HOPE. With expectation they turn away, EXPECTATION. With the simple move of the wrist we can change the dimension of the spirit.

I call expectation dangerous because it steals us from the present and pushes us down a path of disappointment. With expectation we are not facing one another. We are standing alone. With expectation we get caught up in the needs of the ego. I expect to be healed. I expect this raise in salary. I expect to be treated justly. I expect trust and honesty. With expectations there is always disappointments.

With disappointments come resentments. With resentments come anger, animosity, ill will, all negativities, which can only lead to hatred and perhaps violence.

With hope we face one another as the palms face one another. We are not alone. With hope there is patience. Hope is willing to stay with us in the here and now. With hope there is not clinging to any outcome. Yes, I hope this winter won't be so cold. Yes I hope for peace among nations, yet with hope I am not set up for disappointments and frustrations if they do not occur on my timetable. With hope there is only assurance that the future is wide, wide open. With hope the journey may seem longer but her companionship is far more rewarding. And just because the journey is long, does that mean we decide not to go?

Parker Palmer relates this similar message in a story he tells of a friend of his who worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily, he writes, she tries to respond to the waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as surf in that community. Out of deep not knowing I asked her how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better.

I will never forget her enigmatic answer, he writes: "The thing you don't understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!"

Just because the journey with hope may seem long and impossible. Just because the possibilities for hope may seem out of our grasp and reach. Just because the place at the edge of hope may appear thinner and finer than anticipated. Do we turn around and say things are not possible? Do we walk away and simply give up? Do we hold on to our fears rather than to our hopes? Or do we turn to face one another, acknowledge one another's worth and value and stand steadfast?

Take the story of Hal. He is a physician, a physician who values and honors all of his patients. A physician who offers hope and strength simply by listening and valuing each person for who they were. (sign hope)

Hal saw Ellie once a month on Wednesdays. Ellie was a homeless woman whose possessions fit into two shopping carts. Her speech was sometimes rambling and her clothing filthy. Hal was never troubled by this. With his usual kindness and gentleness he welcomed her into his consulting room, listen to the details of her difficult life and did what he could to ease her burden.

After he had been seeing her for sometime, he became aware that she sometime came to the clinic on days when he was not there. The clinic nurses were puzzled by this at first, as she seemed to know in some

mysterious way that it was not her day to see the doctor. After talking to her they determined that she simply wanted to go to his consulting room. Once there she did not actually go in, but would stand on the threshold and slowly and deliberately place her right foot inside the empty room and then withdraw it again and again. After a while she would be satisfied and go away.

The places we are seen and heard are places of hope and holiness. They remind us of our value as human beings. They offer us hope. Ellie needed to only place her foot inside, just one foot inside hope and she would leave renewed and revitalized.

Just because things seem impossible to cure, help, or heal do we stop offering hope? Or do we face one another with kindness and gentleness acknowledging our common worth and value? Be gentle with one another.

In this season of hope 2014 we may be experiencing some of those feelings of impossibilities and fear.

Certainly what is happening around us may appear frightening and frustrating. The darkness this season hangs over us with a heaviness we have not seen or felt in a long time. And yet I live in hope as we heard the words of Dick Gilbert in our first reading; Be gentle with one another, handle with care, for there are human beings within. Life is too transient to be cruel with one another; it is too short for thoughtfulness, too brief for hurting.” Be gentle with one another. And as I stand before you today, as I recall this community and the values we hold up and honor, hope springs to life deep within me. We are the hope for the future. The values of our living tradition breathe this possibility of hope.

Hope, I read once in a newspaper, “hope is a hungry thing, as easily fed by wishful thinking as by certainties.” Well there are some certainties in this season of hope.

We are certain the menorah candles will be lighted.

We are certain the Christmas songs of celebration will be sung.

We are certain winter’s solstice will arrive. And we are certain the fasting of thousands will awaken our hunger for hope.

And I am hungry this season for hope!

I am hungry for the rhetoric of war to cease and for all world leaders to remember to handle with care, there are human beings within.

I am hungry for violence to stop being the only method people try to solve

differences and for compassion and love to take its place.

I am hungry for racial justice and economic equality

I am hungry for hatred to be replaced with love, cruelty to be replaced with kindness and rejection to be replaced with acceptance.

If hope is a hungry thing then let us feed one another this season. Let us feed one another with the possibility of what we can do to make this world a better place.

This is the season of hope, my friends. May she be our constant companion as we feed one another and prepare to take flight.

Blessed Be.