

Preparing for the Unexpected

Isaiah 40:1-11

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

This is the season of Advent. Advent, a word that refers to the four weeks before Christmas. It is also a word that provides the root from which we get the word, “adventure – a thing about to happen.” In the *Oxford Dictionary*, it is “that which comes to us, or happens, without design; chance, fortune, luck.”¹ Did anyone here experience any adventure this week? Anything happen without your design this week?

My sermon title was chosen months ago but how appropriate it is for today. “Preparing for the Unexpected,” is the very experience we have all shared this week because of the wind storm that blew through our area on Wednesday night. As you can see, the church is still without electricity.

I assumed that the O’Gradys were prepared for the unexpected. We have water stored and canned food and a gas-powered generator in the garage. Proud of my preparations for emergencies, I carefully poured in the gas and pulled the cord to start the engine, only to discover our generator wouldn’t start. Couldn’t get the stupid thing to turn over! With every furious pull of the cord my visions of the refrigerator humming and lights in the kitchen faded. I guess our emergency preparation leaves something to be desired. You have to start the stupid thing more often than once every five years apparently. This was a good “wake-up call” for our family to get busy with some more effective planning.

We all listened for good news this week. We talked with neighbors and friends wondering when the electricity would return. We shared pictures of the worst tree disasters on our smart phones. Each new day required a new game plan. Here at

¹ OED online

the church, first choir rehearsal was cancelled (after trying several different area churches with heat and electricity for a change in location). Then the Conversational English class and Bible study were cancelled, and then the Advent Workshop was postponed. Staff worked by natural light and had to dress warmly. We couldn't print or copy the bulletin. The server was down, which meant no email – but we couldn't use the computers anyway - cut off from communication. Each new day was a new adventure.

We don't have electricity this morning, but that doesn't mean we don't have power! Life without electricity is an inconvenience. Life without power is a major problem.

Isaiah, the prophet, tells of the adventure of a new beginning with God, setting the powers of this world in sharp contrast to the power of the Word of God. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God . . .prepare the way of the Lord, make straight a highway for our God. . . the Word of our God will stand forever.”

Advent hope is especially important in times of adversity like this one. This kind of hope is based not upon a “cheery outlook” or the “power of positive thinking”; this kind of hope looks at reality – that there is no way anything good could ever come out of this – and dares to believe that God is not finished yet; that in the end there will be healing and joy and a resolution that is not possible given the circumstances. It will happen because (and only because) God says it will happen.

In the time of Isaiah, oppressed by foreigners and exiled without a homeland, the people of God were hopeless about the future. Things couldn't have been any worse. Their dreams were crushed and their reality brutal. But just when they were about to give up, Isaiah proclaims God is about to do something wonderful.

Advent is a time of waiting but it is also a time of the “But wait!” Just when you think the story is over, an unexpected turn of events brings new hope. Just when you begin to believe that God does not keep promises; “But wait!” Just when you are about to give up on the entire idea that God can do anything in life, or can answer prayers, or loves us and knows what is going on in our lives, there comes a “But wait” when some unexpected turn of events and some change within yourself brings an entirely new beginning, and life becomes an adventure again.

The world around us and within us gets twisted into grotesque forms, distorting human life and community into destructive patterns, just like the trees throughout the region were twisted in the storm this week. Life needs to get straightened out! The good news that God’s help is on the way makes all the difference.

There is a story told of a prisoner of war camp during World War II where the British and American soldiers were separated by a fence. Once every day the chaplains were allowed to speak at the fence. They discovered that if they spoke in Gaelic, the German guards could not understand them. On the British side, a make-shift radio had been constructed out of tinfoil and wire. They were able to listen to the BBC news reports about the war. Each day at the fence, the news of Allied progress was relayed from the British side to the Americans. Then finally one day came the news that the Germans had surrendered via the famous Winston Churchill announcement on VE Day in May 1945. The German command structure was so disheveled by that time that the news had not reached the guards but all the prisoners knew the end was coming and their freedom was imminent. What a changed atmosphere in the camp! Still physically imprisoned but set free within nonetheless. Prisoners were singing and celebrating, sharing what little they had with one another because they knew their circumstances were about to change. That is the power of good news! Knowing that rescue is imminent changes everything.

Like those soldiers, we too live in the tension between present reality and future fulfillment. Without heat and lights, we are especially aware that we are waiting this morning for power to return. We can choose to link up to a warmer and brighter future by beginning to live as God intended with power from above, grounded in the hope of the Good News that Christ has come and will come again. Or we can continue to live pretending that we have everything we need ourselves, with the illusion that we are self-sufficient and prepared for the unexpected. “I’m just fine on my own, thank you! With my trusty generator in the garage if anything should go wrong, I have all I need.”

Wherever human hope perishes, God says “Comfort, O comfort my people . . . prepare the way of the Lord.” It may be a surgical waiting room, a divorce court, a welfare line, but it is always a place where our strength fades and our resources are exhausted. It is precisely there, at the place where hope is at its dimmest, when the flickering flame is about to go out, that we hear the Word of the Lord – “Comfort – Comfort my people.”

There is a new beginning, by God’s grace, that began long ago, in a quiet and unremarkable place, in Bethlehem, in a stable, and it seemed that the entire creation held its breath. The Good News that God has come to rescue us has power! And ever since then people have found a new beginning within themselves that has affected how they lived, all of it centered in Jesus Christ.

Even those with little interest in religion get caught up in the possibility, in the hope that maybe a different world is emerging within and through this fractured one that we live in. Maybe God is up to something wonderful – reversing the order of things, satisfying the need for justice and doing so in a way that restores dignity to those who

have lost it and puts resources into the hands of those who need it. It is the great reversal of things as they are, to become as they ought to be that is at the heart of the message of Christmas. God has entered the world to transform it. to transform you and me – and brings power to our living.

One of my favorite verses of Scripture comes from the sixteenth chapter of John, where Jesus is teaching his disciples. He looks at the glazed look on their faces, as I'm looking at your glazed eyes right now and so he said to them, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."² On this cold day, we too have arrived at the same place.

Long ago on the adventure of faith, the people of God began a journey from slavery toward a land of promise. And the Lord fed them with manna from heaven to sustain them on that journey. Jesus, reenacting that meal with his disciples, fed them with new hope for a future that belongs to God. We come to this table (The Lord's table) and this sacred meal this morning to be nourished in that same hope! Let us so come to this table that we may receive from the Lord that which nourishes and empowers human life – and launches us again in the adventure of faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

² John 16:12