

December 2 – First Sunday in Advent

Tending Her Sheep

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 2 8-15

Do you remember when you were a child, how long the month of December was? It seemed like it took an eternity for Christmas to come. The wait was excruciating. Even with the use of Advent calendars to help us mark the progression of days, it seemed like Christmas would never get here. Do you remember?

Do you remember all the planning that went into the celebration of a once in a lifetime event, whether that be a wedding, anniversary, special trip, or birth? You had your “to do” list of things that needed to be accomplished. With the checking off of each one if felt as if you were closer to the realization of that dream. Do you remember?

Can you recall a time you were promised something really special? You trusted the person who made the promise but as days pass by and the promise is not realized you have doubts. Are they going to carry through with their promise? I think about a time when I was about Sophi’s age, around ten. We had good friends and they had promised me that the following summer I could come spend a week with them. I could ride the train all by myself. Nothing was mentioned by them again for many weeks. Christmas came with their card and no summer invite. I asked my parents over and over about it. Do you think they remember? I was assured that they would keep their word, unless something happened. That was not quite the reassurance I wanted. I was hopeful but filled with doubt. Then in April a letter came from them addressed to me, not to my parents. It was the long anticipated invite. Do you remember a time such as this in your life?

I share these stories to get you in the proper frame of mind to hear the story of hope that begins to bloom in the lives of the people in Judea so long ago, in the life of Madelon, the heroine of our story.

The prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus: “The time is coming declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel.” The promise talked about was that God would send a Messiah.

Since those words had been spoken, the people of Israel had been taken into captivity in Babylon and their capital city, Jerusalem, had been destroyed. They had ultimately returned and rebuilt, only to be overrun by first the Greeks and now the Romans. God had made a promise but for many it was hard to trust that promise. So many negative things had happened. It was easy to feel as if God did not care or, worse, God was another undependable part of their world, making promises that were not kept.

Have you had times of such doubt? It is hard to hold on to the words that God loves us so much when life seems to be kicking sand in our eyes. To hear Jesus' words that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, when the weight of living is crushing us, can make us frustrated. To have hope in times of hopelessness is challenging. Yet, that is part of the journey of faith. We are to hold on to the promises that God is with us, loves us, and will give us life eternal. We are to hope even when life seems to say such hope is a mockery.

This is the situation the people of Judah were experiencing. They had the words of the prophets telling them to hope in the coming of the Messiah, but the tramping boots of the Roman occupying armies seemed to proclaim a different message.

So, how do you hang on to hope? You strive to remain faithful in the midst of routine. The people had long been waiting for a Messiah. In the birth stories, we hear of shepherds tending their sheep. They went about the normal duties of their lives, but with a sense of anticipation. The shepherds, we believe, held to the promise of a Messiah someday. They did not expect to be an integral part of that great drama but they lived with hope. The wise men scanned the heavens because they believed God would tell them through the stars when something portentous would happen. So every night they would climb the ziggurat with anticipation that tonight they would see something new.

It isn't very glamorous being called to do your job while hanging on to hope. Yet, failure to do so might mean missing out. In the story of the Christmas Rose we heard the first part of the tale. Madelon is tending her sheep. Suddenly she sees some of her fellow shepherds and they are not with their sheep but moving purposefully towards Bethlehem. She hears them talking about being visited by angels. She learns that they are taking gifts to the Christ Child. She doesn't doubt their words or laugh it off. She

believes that the long-awaited promise is coming true. Yet, she would have missed the magic of that night if she was not doing her job and open to how God might be at work in and around her.

Showing up, doing what God asks you to do, but always aware that there might be something bigger going on, is how you hold on to hope. I think of people who went through challenging health issues with joy. They amazed all they came in contact with, from doctors to family. When asked what their secret was one said, "I know God is with me and I am waiting to see what God is going to do in this situation." She wasn't necessarily believing that she would be cured but she knew God was in the mix of life. She realized she had a choice. She could give into the pain and become discouraged by all the procedures she had to go through, or she could live with joy and anticipation.

I think of the woman who had to move into a care facility. She decided to embrace this step on her life's journey with anticipation. Instead of looking at all she had to give up, she went forward hoping God still had a few surprises left for her.

We, as people of faith know the promises. One of the great ones of our faith is "those who walk in darkness will see a great light." Do you believe it? Can you go through your dark times, whatever they are, trusting that the light will shine again? It's hard. But today is a story about believing, trusting and living with hope even when life seems hopeless. It is hard but we serve a God who keeps promises.

In closing let me share a Christmas story. I have shared it before so if you have heard it, forgive me. Mom went to church that Christmas Eve without joy. Some months before there had been a terrible falling out between her daughter and she and her husband. The daughter had wanted more financial help and they felt the need to draw a line. When told no, the daughter had left the house in a rage saying she was never ever going to talk to them again. In the many months since that time there had been no communication. They had been unfriended from her facebook account, she had blocked their number on her phone so they could not send her messages, and emails went unanswered. She had informed her brother that if he so much as let the parents know anything about her she would cut him off too. He had honored that pledge even though he could see the pain it caused his mom because he felt someone should keep some

kind of contact with her. Mom agreed. For months she had been praying that God would bring some light into the darkness.

They were at church, like always, but the music did not touch her. She wished she had not come. She stood for the first carol woodenly wondering how she could get through the service. The door opened and the daughter was there. She looked to see where her family might be. The usher, who knew the situation, grabbed her by the hand and almost dragged her down the aisle. Mom, upon seeing her, opened her arms and the daughter rushed into the warm embrace. If the family had not come to church, the daughter would have left likely not having the courage to go to the house.

Broken family relationships do not always end this well, but it is a story of one who prayed with hope, went through the routines of life knowing God was in charge, and light came that day.

May we be faithful as we prepare our hearts anew to welcome God's messiah. Today we lit the first candle of Hope, the prophet's candle, remembering their call to prepare, to believe in faith and to anticipate what God can and will do in your life.