

December 13, 2020

I love starting a new church year because it's an opportunity to talk about our four gospels. There are traditional symbols that have come to represent each one. The symbols originate from Ezekiel. The prophet has a vision; he sees a winged creature with four faces: A human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Early in Christian tradition, these four symbols came to be associated with each of our gospels.

The Human face has come to represent Matthew, Mark is the Lion, Luke is the Ox and John is the Eagle. You often see these symbols carved into pulpits or in the stained-glass windows...

Our reading today is from John, the eagle... And I like that symbol. I like to think of the gospel of John as soaring. It is powerful, lofty with meaning and sees a big picture. One of the themes of the gospel of John is that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. Our reading for today says that John the Baptist was sent by God, to testify to that light.

For me the season of Advent is all about waiting and watching, or attending our hopes... Today I'd like to do some reflecting on Hope, because that light is our Hope.

We often think about Hope as if it's a passive or a quaint thing-- it is not. Hope is a human struggle; it is a living and breathing entity. There are two things that kill hope-- despair, and presumption.

If we despair and believe our hope will never happen-- it never will. The hope literally withers and dies. And on the other hand, if we presume our hope will happen without doing anything about it, it certainly won't-- exactly because we don't do anything to help it along.

Hope that is alive is always a work in progress—it has the courage to believe and the energy to do something about it. Hope that is alive keeps plugging away... Hope is a continuous spiritual exercise that has to be attended and refreshed. And hopes come in all shapes and sizes...

A quick story... This past week I had a memory pop up on my Facebook page, about a trip some years back when Kris and I flew out to Seattle to visit our daughter, Jo. And maybe I'm reminiscing with this story only because I'm so "presence deprived..."

You can talk on the phone all you want, but being physically present with someone you love is special. Presence communicates where words fail. Presence expresses love, care, warmth, concern, belonging, connection... Sometimes presence can be just silence, breathing together and confident of love... It's always wonderful to **be with** those you love...

What I remember so vividly about that trip, was leaving her. Through tears, we hugged, said our goodbyes, I told Jo I loved her. We got on the plane. It was late afternoon, and the weather was wet, overcast and rainy, like typical Seattle. As the plane moved away from the gate the clouds opened and it literally poured. We taxied to the runway in a fog of drenched sadness.

As the plane took off, I watched out the window as cars became smaller, buildings became smaller, neighborhoods became smaller, we entered the clouds, and suddenly there was nothing; just the reflection of my face in the window. I remember thinking I was just staring at myself, it felt so alone... It was awful!

Suddenly we broke through the clouds and a new horizon emerged. The sun was setting, and an arc of golden light stretched behind us from one wing tip to the other. I was reminded that a light does shine in those dark places of our lives.

I started to reflect about the love I feel for my family. It's indeed sad to say good-bye. And yet I started seeing the love of my family in a different way. It was kind of transformative... I thought about how strong, confident and durable our love for one another is.

As I live and breathe, I love my family. I started feeling thankful. And the strength of that love continues to be my Living Hope.

Whether near or far, or now, living through this pandemic... I'm committed to keeping that love strong. That's what this year has been all about for me! And I'm sure for all of you as well.

As the flight continued, the clouds vanished, the sun set and from below I started to see tiny little lights here and there. Sometimes I could discern a little town, and on one occasion we went over a bigger city. I remember thinking how the gospel of John was symbolized by an eagle, how it sees a big picture.

What to us seems like great distance, from another perspective is really nothing at all. The horizons that God sees, we can't possibly imagine. God's big picture, is certainly bigger than what my little brain can possibly see...

There are little things that I hope for and some big things too. One of my hopes is mentioned in our reading from Isaiah, "to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners."

Isaiah speaks of a great leveling and straightening, a great peace and justice for all people and for the entire world. Talk about a big picture! Is that too much to hope for? I don't know, but one thing I do know-- the God that Jesus reveals is a God who sees a big picture, and for whom nothing is impossible. And it's all God's work...

What are you hoping for this year? I'm sure each of you has different answers. To someone without a job, it might be employment. To someone with a health concern, it might be healing and wholeness. To someone in depression, it might be finding purpose. To someone in a broken family, it might be reconciliation.

The Advent experience is different for each of us-- and I imagine different every year. Hope is a miraculous thing. And it is God who gives us that light in a world of darkness.

It is the birth of a Living Hope in us that makes all the difference in and for this world! The Hope of Advent is alive and well, and the heart of the Kingdom of God keeps beating along... Good news indeed! Amen.