

Ready to Walk in the Light
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*“Hope” is the thing with feathers--
That perches in the soul--
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops--at all.*

So wrote Emily Dickenson.

Hope started early: it's an old virtue. The prophet Isaiah wrote words of hope more than 2,500 years ago, looking forward to a time of peace while war was all around. Waiting for those “days to come.” Waiting for a miracle. I guess he died waiting. The people of Jesus' time would read those words about “all the nations” and “the mountain of the Lord's house.” Hoping for a change, waiting for a miracle to happen to the landscape. I guess they kept on waiting. Today we read about changing weapons into farm equipment: beautiful words about a hope for peace. And I am still waiting. “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” I am still hoping, and waiting. Where's that miracle? We are still singing, still asking “Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.”

Those words of Isaiah about swords and ploughshares have inspired many people: inspired works of poetry and art. They are engraved in front of the United Nations building in New York, along with a sculpture of a muscular man in the act of beating the metal of a sword and bending into a new purpose. They show up in many statements and flyers for the peace movement. Even statements by politicians may have been inspired by those words, calling for a change from war to peace. For instance:

“Every gun that it made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.” Those are the words of the great radical President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

But sometimes I feel that the poetry of Isaiah obscures the immediacy of his message. Yes, we can listen and feel inspired by the beauty of the mental picture he paints. But where is the miracle? Can hope be made more tangible?

Advent is a time of hope. It is a time of looking forward to Christmas with all its beauty and wonder. But Advent is also a time of preparation and heart-searching. It is a time for facing up to reality. The prophet's vision questions us where we are, today. The church is called to self-examination. The world desperately needs to hear a word of hope, to see the light shining in the darkness. Advent is a time when God challenges you and me to walk in the light.

The activist and theologian Jim Wallis tells a story about his wife, Joy Carroll, one of the first women ordained in the Church of England. One summer they went to the Greenbelt Festival -

Greenbelt is an arts, faith and justice festival that's been going on in Britain since 1974 - where they had first met, with their 4-year-old son, Luke. Joy was up on the stage celebrating the Eucharist for 25,000 British young people. Their young son, sitting on his father's lap, was watching his mom lead the service. She would speak and people would respond, "The Lord be with you ... and also with you." She would ask them to do things and they would. After watching this for a while, Luke looked up at his father and asked. "Dad, can men do that too?" So a huge generational shift had taken place – a hopeful change in the narrative of the church, the society, and our families.

But being hopeful for one generation is not enough. A female priest at a festival or a female politician running for president or a female preaching to you at this moment is not a complete picture. So many women still struggle against sexism and stereotyping and oppression. Advent hope requires a prophetic resilience. We reach for those stories of promise from the next generation, while acknowledging the pain and fatigue of hopefulness at the same time. And still we keep ourselves ready to walk in the light.

Last September, a six-year-old boy wrote a letter to President Obama. This was in the wake of news stories about the bombing of Aleppo.

Dear President Obama,

Remember the boy who was picked up by the ambulance in Syria? Can you please go get him and bring him to [my home]? Park in the driveway or on the street and we will be waiting for you guys with flags, flowers, and balloons. We will give him a family and he will be our brother. Catherine, my little sister, will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him. In my school, I have a friend from Syria, Omar, and I will introduce him to Omar. We can all play together. We can invite him to birthday parties and he will teach us another language. We can teach him English too, just like my friend Aoto from Japan.

Please tell him that his brother will be Alex who is a very kind boy, just like him. Since he won't bring toys and doesn't have toys, Catherine will share her big blue striped white bunny. And I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him additions and subtractions in math. And he [can] smell Catherine's lip gloss penguin which is green. She doesn't let anyone touch it.

Thank you very much! I can't wait for you to come!

Alex

I think that Alex may wait a long time for his Syrian friend to arrive. He will have to be resilient, to keep the doors of his heart wide open, to keep hope alive. He will learn some hard facts about immigration and prejudice. Probably he will experience pain and compassion fatigue. We will need to get ready to accompany Alex, and other children like him, to stay ready to walk in the light.

After the election our first African American president in 2008, some people started wondering whether America was now a post-racial society. They wondered that, and maybe hoped that for a little while. Now, most of us are pretty sure that there is still a lot of work to do on that front. We may have to wait a long time to overcome the racial divisions, now so plainly visible. It is an exhausting prospect. But still, we have to get ready to walk in the light.

Pauli Murray knew about the pain and fatigue of hope. She was born in 1910, and was a civil rights activist and the first African American woman to be ordained as an Episcopal priest. In her poem, "Dark Testament: Verse 8", she writes

*Hope is a crushed stalk
Between clenched fingers*

*Hope is a bird's wing
Broken by a stone.
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty —
A word whispered with the wind,
A dream of forty acres and a mule,
A cabin of one's own and a moment to rest,
A name and place for one's children
And children's children at last . . .
Hope is a song in a weary throat.
Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.
Give me a song of faith
And a people to believe in it.
Give me a song of kindness
And a country where I can live it.
Give me a song of hope and love
And a brown girl's heart to hear it.*

We have already heard the words of the Gospel about waiting and wakefulness. We know that this is not a passive waiting for a miracle. So what kind of waiting, what kind of hope do Isaiah and Matthew call us to?

It's a active kind of hope. An active willingness to submit to both judgment and salvation. An active willingness to be taught, an active willingness to walk in a waiting sort of way. A willingness to submit to the smithing process: to be transformed into a tool of life, not death. If we bring that combination of hope and willingness to God, we may be transformed, hammered into a new shape.

Maybe we are still waiting because we thought that the miracle of the mountain lifted up, the people streaming uphill, was going to happen while we stood idly by, praying around candles and singing carols. I will light a candle and I will sing the carols, but I will also consider what kind of tool I am for God. I will consider ways in which my anger or frustration or even fatigue may become creative. This will not be a waiting time of inertia. It will be the fallow time that calls forth a new harvest.

My hope lies in the interconnection of judgment and salvation – that even amidst the sin and devastation of the people to whom Isaiah is speaking, God still issues the invitation, still calls us to God's holy mountain, so that we might walk in the light of the Lord. My hope lies in the challenge God issues: can you be part of this vision, or are you still waiting on the sidelines?

Advent is a time of hope. I look forward to Christmas, to the company of loves ones and the beauty of our traditions. But I also use Advent to look inward and outward. Advents is about learning how to hope. It is a time when we orient ourselves in the direction of hope with patience and resilience. I want to do more than wait for the miracle. I want to get ready to learn. I want to get ready to walk. I want to see the mountain. I want to stay awake. I want to sing the song that perches in the soul and never stops...at all.
Amen.