

Recollecting Hope
December 9, 2012
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: Isaiah 40:3-6, Luke 3:1-5

Last week we entered this Advent season by orienting ourselves in two ways. The first was a brief overview and reminder of what differentiates the Gospel of Luke from other versions of Jesus' story in scripture. In this new year in the church, Luke is the featured gospel, a gospel that pays particular attention to women and highlights Jesus' ministry to those in society who are oppressed, outcast and disadvantaged.

The second part of our "orientation" to this Advent, so to speak, was that we would think about this as an "Upside-Down" Advent. Luke's gospel emphasizes Jesus' power in transforming the world into God's kingdom – and each of us along with it. That transformation requires that we see things upside down from the way they most often are.

How do we do that, we might ask? How can we retrain our eyes to envision the world as God would have it? How can we prepare ourselves to see everything anew, which is, after all, what Advent is all about?

One step is suggested in our denomination's constitution, of all places. We look to the Book of Order for the rules of the church, which are recorded in sometimes excruciating detail. But among all those "shalls" and "mays" lie some gems that can speak to us in meaningful ways.

One of those gems is how that book describes Advent. It is to be, the book says, "a season to recollect the hope of the coming of Christ and to look forward to the Lord's coming again." Did you catch that phrase, "a season to recollect hope?" To re-collect it. It's true, isn't it? That we have hope around us at all times, but sometimes we lose track of it. Sometimes we do need to stop and recollect it, re-gather it. That's why we start each church year with Advent – to re-gather and re-collect our hope before moving forward as disciples.

Today's scripture readings testify to the reasons for our hope, which is different from a sunny kind of optimism. Hope and optimism are two very different things, you see. Hope is rooted in the certainty that we will be delivered. Optimism is a bit more flimsy, more

speculative and disconnected from any real truth. That's why, as people of faith, we speak of hope rather than optimism.

Today's scriptures reveal the reasons that underwrite our hope. In Isaiah's prophecy to God's people in Judah, God sends a message of consolation and comfort. God promises to make a way out of no way for the chosen people, a deliverance out of their exile back home to the land of their ancestors. Then we hear Isaiah's words echoed again in the third chapter of Luke, a new prophecy for a new age, that God will send a deliverer for all the nations, Jesus the Christ, the messiah.

Let the bells toll the great, good news across the land, we want to sing . . . and we should. But, perhaps, not so fast. This is, after all, to be an upside-down Advent. Much of our culture rushes around madly, fretting over shopping lists and exhaustively preparing for festive gatherings. But in Luke, we hear a different voice and a different command. It is John the Baptist, who calls us to repent, to be still and enter into intense self-examination.

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You know, God would have made it big in Hollywood, specifically in casting. Throughout scripture, God gives us memorable characters who make just the right entrance and add an unexpected twist to the plot. Consider John the Baptist. Shocking in appearance, munching on locusts like popcorn, living in the wilderness and, truth be told, probably not smelling very good. He was the ultimate party crasher. He barges in just as we are gearing up for parties and celebrations. Repent, he says, make way in your heart for the coming of the Lord!

Well, THAT'S inconvenient! Who invited this guy, anyway? This is an upside-down way to go about celebrating.

But in our hearts, we know he is right. We know that, before the parties, there is work to be done. God's promise of a messiah came without conditions. That is NOT to say that it comes without expectations. Repent. Turn back. Prepare to be delivered out of exile, Isaiah said. Prepare for the coming of the Lord, John the Baptist echoed, using Isaiah's exact words.

Together, Isaiah and John the Baptist recognize that we don't make it easy for God to enter our lives. It is, they seem to be saying, as if we lead the Almighty on a goose chase. Rather than giving way, rather than preparing the way for the Lord, we throw up

all sorts of obstacles. Our way is that of ups and downs, highs and lows, zig-zags and detours, rough places and bumpy roads. Anything we can do to shake God off our trail.

Listen again to the words from today's scriptures (Luke 40:3-6):

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

These verses give us a topographical map of our efforts to evade our God. We travel crooked paths, swerving first right and then left, looking over our shoulder. We rush headlong down into low valleys hoping we can outrun God on the flat land. We scramble up to high mountains and hills to hide behind the rocks. We even take the rough ways in hopes that the Hound of Heaven might not be tough enough to track us.

But God's promise is unshakeable. The 19th century poet Francis Thompson captured God's doggedness in pursuit of us in his poem about God's grace, titled *The Hound of Heaven*. Listen to its opening verse and see if you don't recognize something in yourself:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

It's true, isn't it? We do travel all sorts of "labyrinthine ways" to try to shake God, even when we are supposed to be preparing to receive the Lord. We justify our own self-sufficiency. We avoid confronting that which is worst within us. We stick to old, destructive habits and tell ourselves and our God that it's really not as bad as it looks.

But the Lord is unshakeable, and, through Isaiah and John the Baptist, God says simply, "Enough! Enough. It won't work. Let's take a more constructive approach to our relationship."

Rather than try to hinder God, Isaiah and John the Baptist command us to prepare the coming of our Lord. Straighten out our paths. Avoid the low valleys and the precarious peaks of the mountains and hills. Make the way smooth, in our hearts and souls. Slow down. Stop. Draw near to the Lord in prayer and meditation, in our relationships, in our discipleship, in our efforts to be the hands and feet of Christ, in the renewing of our minds and spirits for a new year in the service of our Lord.

Take note, church. This instruction does not come with angry recrimination. Quite the opposite. God's command to Isaiah begins this way:

Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid

We hear this gentle invitation and our repentance becomes rejoicing, the dread of our penalty becomes our uncontainable praise. It is, after all, an upside-down Advent.

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Last week I was driving back to church from a meeting at the Salvation Army. We'd been brainstorming about how we might find ways to continue the Caldwell House ministry. My phone rang. It was a former neighbor at Caldwell House. From her mouth to my ear, her excitement and joy radiated through the cellular waves.

She called to say she starts Monday in a new job in a management role at a bank in town. She'd "graduated" from Caldwell House and gotten a place of her own. With a bit more peace and quiet, she'd fully engaged in her job search. She had never stopped believing she had valuable skills and experience that would once again get her back to work.

She followed up that phone call with a note titled simply, "Surrender." She wrote:

You and the wonderful church members of Caldwell, including the lovely ladies in the homeless shelter were all so very kind to me. I will forever be grateful for a roof over my head. How miraculous that the roof over my head was Caldwell Church. You and the congregation and the choir gave me hope each Sunday and blessed me with a hot breakfast that I still continue to talk about! Boy were those biscuits, grits, eggs and sausage the BEST!!!! I'll have to come back and visit soon to thank all of you in person for what you meant to me in my journey with God.

(I've attached an) article on "Surrender" that comes from a devotional book. Even though this article is not about me, I certainly can relate! When I embraced this very odd thought that my life was actually coming together in the way that God wanted it to, my whole perspective completely changed and I started really embracing what was happening in my life each and every day instead of resisting the conditions I was experiencing. The more I surrendered to God, the more God was able to work out what HE needed me to do for my life to fit HIS plan and not my plan. I will have to remember this lesson each and every day. It's a most wonderful lesson for all of us to embrace and hold close to our hearts in today's ever-changing world.

Thank you John and Caldwell for all of your support, your kindness in your words and your welcoming me at a time I thought I was really falling apart. You and your congregation were the first step in my life coming together the way God wanted it to. How about that!!!

How did Isaiah and John the Baptist put it?

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

* * *

Friends in this upside-down season, we first look back before we look forward. We remember God's deliverance of God's people from domination and exile. We give thanks that God then came in Christ to deliver us all.

We recollect our hope. We re-gather it, because it was never really far from us. We just lose sight of it sometimes.

With the recollection of our hope, we repent, and our repentance becomes our rejoicing.

In the name of the one who was and is and is to come again, Amen.