

Mountain Climbing

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Sunday, December 1, 2019 ~ ~ 1st Sunday of Advent
Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

Welcome to Advent, the season in the church year that everyone loves but few completely understand because it coincides with the secular anticipation of Christmas timewise but is entirely different from it. The word “advent” has its origins in Latin, the language of the ancient church, and can be loosely translated as “coming.” This is because in the church this is the time of year when we anticipate the arrival – the birth – the “coming” of the Christ Child on Christmas. For the Christian calendar, therefore, the first Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the New Year in the church. This is where it gets a little confusing, especially with the secular New Year’s holiday following so closely on the heels of Christmas. Suffice to say we Christians consider this day – the first Sunday of Advent – to mark the beginning of the liturgical year as we wait for the birth of the Christ Child to begin the cycle of worship once again.

The color scheme is another one of the things which distinguishes Advent from the secular celebrations surrounding it. The secular version of waiting for Christmas centers on holiday stories like the Elf of the Shelf, the Grinch and grandma getting run over by a reindeer. I know, I know, it sounds like an

insignificant thing but this color scheme difference really does matter. The colors of Advent in the church are blue and violet because these were considered the colors of royalty in Jesus time and Jesus, as God's son, was the supreme example of a new kind of royalty. Jesus came from the Davidic line of kings which is also why Mary, Jesus' mother, is always clothed in blue. It's also why our new Advent paraments are blue and purple with spirals of gold, and the color scheme of the Advent wreath is the same. Advent is also marked by a different way of counting down the days until Christmas other than the number of shopping days remaining. Each week in Advent has a different theme that we as Christians seeking to prepare ourselves to welcome the Christ Child into our lives are invited to reflect on more deeply. These themes, each signified by a different candle on the Advent wreath, are Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. There can be other themes during Advent, which we have observed here in our church in other years, but this year we return to these four traditional themes for our four weeks of waiting for Baby Jesus. Each week we remember and celebrate what it is we are anticipating to come into the world at the birth of the Christ Child: a resurgence of hope, peace, joy and love.

The first Sunday of Advent is traditionally the Sunday to focus on, reflect more deeply upon, pray about, and look for – hope. Should be a fairly simple task, don't' you think – this

concentration on hope? After all, we know what hope is, right? Okay, fine. What is it? How would *you* define hope? (*pause for responses*) Well, according to that bastion of instant information, *Wikipedia*, hope is “an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large.” Of course, hope is also a verb and as a verb “its definitions include: ‘expect with confidence’ and ‘to cherish a desire with anticipation.’” So, I think it’s safe to say that hope requires a positive mindset to begin with, something that’s not always that easy to hold on to. Raging political divisiveness, systemic social and economic inequality, global warming and climate change, the rise of authoritarianism around the world – these are our daily realities and none of them are very hopeful. And yet, God calls us to hope. God challenges us to hope. God needs us to hope, to expect with confidence that a better world is possible, that seemingly insurmountable problems can be addressed, that we will have something that’s still good and even wonderful to hand on to our children and grandchildren.

This need for hope in the midst of all the situations we confront each day that run counter to the very hope God calls us to is exactly why Isaiah’s metaphor of mountain climbing works as a beginning point for our Advent reflections. Today’s text from the second chapter of Isaiah comes as the great prophet is just beginning his work for the living God. In this particular text,

Isaiah is laying out what is a pretty common prophetic vision of the time describing a vision in which people from all over the world are drawn to the Temple in Jerusalem – Isaiah refers to it here as “the mountain of the Lord’s house” – to worship the living God and be taught the ways of God and how to walk in God’s path. These people coming from everywhere will receive instruction and the key piece of that instruction from God’s own self will be for the people to “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” God will see to it that the nations and the peoples “learn war no more.” In other words, Isaiah is prophesying the ultimate hope there can be an end to war and divisiveness, that God wants all the peoples of the world to figure out how to live peaceably with each other. An impossible dream? It certainly has proven to be, over the millennia from Christ’s time to our own. But is it something still to be hoped for no matter how impossible it has proven to be? Isaiah answers this question with an unrestrained YES! Hope is what keeps the dream of peace alive. When you think about it, hope is really what keeps every dream alive. Hope is what makes dreams and aspirations realized possible because hope calls them out of us, pulling us forward when common sense might be telling us to give up and find a different way. Hope is the stuff dreams are made of and none of us can ever have too many dreams.

But, we have to be honest and admit that it is often not easy to hold on to hope. In fact, sometimes it's a real struggle. When bad news piles up, one thing after another, hope gets buried under a mountain of fear and fatigue, worry and despair. It becomes increasingly difficult to see hope lying beyond all that there is to worry about in our personal lives and let's not even talk about the anxiety that kicks in when the news comes on. One bad moment after another in a crescendo of worrisome news washes over us before we can hit the off button. And then what? Do you pretend it doesn't matter, that something will happen and everything will be fine again? Do you just force yourself to think about something else until the anxiety dies down? Do you find a Snickers bar or a bag of chips or a glass of wine? Not to worry. We've all been there. These days you can't help it. Enter Advent and its message of good news that the Savior of the world is soon to be born. Dare to accept the invitation to celebrate hope reborn and to believe we are its witnesses. Trust that hope is calling us forward to climb up the rocky hillsides of life we encounter every day. Hope reminds us that with God nothing is impossible, that trust is worthwhile, that we can make a difference and God always, always, always wants us to try.

Mountain climbing – that's what it feels like some days to hold on to hope. Searching for a solid handhold, wedging your foot into the next step and shifting your weight to move forward,

hoping against hope that you're making the right move. It's scary. It's nerve-wracking. But it's also incredibly exhilarating and empowering when challenges are overcome and hope wins out. It's not easy but anyone can try. Even a baby goat can climb a sheer rock face cliff. Did you know that? In the *Sabbath Circles*© lesson for today you'll find a link to an incredible *Youtube.com* video of an ibex, a kind of alpine goat, climbing a sheer rock face dam in Italy. The goats climb the dam because the stones it's made from leech a special kind of salt that the goats need for their unique metabolisms and bone structure. In other words, their very being demands they climb the sheer rock face that appears impossible to climb. In this video you can see a mother goat climbing right up what looks to be a sheer rock face with her little baby goat not very far behind. I was watching it and screaming at my computer screen – “No! No! Little goat, get down!” But it didn't. Its mother went up the cliff and so it went up the cliff, pausing only slightly when it momentarily lost its footing. When the goats reach the salt leech areas, they just perch there contentedly licking and licking until they have their fill. Then, presumably they make their way back down although I must admit the video didn't show that part. I trust they made it back down. I certainly hope they did. They must have, otherwise there wouldn't be another generation of goats climbing to reach the salt and there are always more goats ready to climb.

Dear friends, welcome to Advent and the promise visible in miraculous climbing goats. Welcome to Advent and the excitement of waiting for the Christ Child to enter the world afresh once more. Welcome to hope that is so much more than a wish or a dream. Welcome to the mountain where God's vision for the world becomes visible as we work to reach for God's hope in spite of everything that tries to convince us not to. Welcome to this place where we dare to believe that the world, and each of us, still hold the potential to be all God envisioned us to be – all that we long to be. Dear friends, welcome to the rest of your life, if you are willing to choose and live hope every day. Amen.