Sermon – December 1, 2024 – "Advent, Part 1: Hope"
by Rev. Dale Carl Fredrickson

During the holiday season, we carry many unspoken expectations. We desire rest, connection with friends and family, delicious food, big wins from our favorite teams, laughter with our grandkids, the birth of a healthy child, and inspiring words and music at church that help us commune with God. We also want memories together to sustain us for another year. In short, don't we all, at some level, want to be seen and heard by those we love and connect to the mystery of the season?

But this year, beyond these desires, doesn't it feel like the world as we've known it is fraying at the edges? It's not just in America, but across the globe, particularly with the cries of injustice and pain in Ukraine, Gaza, and Syria.

We all hoped it would be different—that the painful consequences of ongoing division and warfare would finally cease.

Life on Planet Earth can unravel in ways we didn't see or expect. This can sometimes create an uneasiness within each of us, a dis(ease) if you will.

We long for times when life was seemingly easier and less complicated. A break from the news cycles that spin tells of despair endlessly. Fraying happens during this time of year: anxiety, cynicism, and tension within our relationship can lead us to miss the gifts of this season entirely. There is good news in Advent if we only learn to wait and watch.

Each year, the church tells the story of Immanuel, a God who becomes human. At Christmas, we celebrate "God with us." This story, which we call Advent from the Latin word for "coming" or "arrival," helps us see beyond the obvious to the miraculous. Advent focuses our eyes on the micro, where God is working tirelessly.

Joan Chittister is an American Benedictine nun, theologian, and writer describes Advent with such beauty. "*The liturgical year does not begin at the heart of the Christian enterprise. It does not immediately plunge us into the chaos of the Crucifixion or the giddy confusion of the Resurrection. Instead, the year opens with Advent, the season that teaches us to wait for what is beyond the obvious. It trains us to see what is behind the apparent. Advent makes us look for God in all those places we have, until now, ignored."*

It's as if Advent gives us eyes and hearts to see the world differently. Advent offers us the gift of memory, whispering the truths of hope, peace, joy, and love into our ears.

But real hope doesn't come quickly. As the world seems bent on destroying itself, we wait expectantly for God to bring us real hope and to act.

David Whyte is an Anglo-Irish Poet who urges us to feel it all in advent. He writes, *"The antidote to despair is not to be found in the brave attempt to cheer ourselves up with happy abstracts, but in paying a profound and courageous attention to the body and the breath, independent of our imprisoning thoughts and stories, even, surprisingly, in paying attention to despair itself, and the way we hold on to it, and which we realise was never ours to own and to hold in the first place. To see and experience despair fully in our body is to begin to*

see it as a necessary, seasonal visitation, and the first step in letting it have its own life, neither holding it nor moving it on before its time."

Have you ever felt that the world was fraying at the edges?

Violence. Pain. Hatred. Dishonesty.
Russian threats of nuclear war
Peace talks between Israel and Palestine are being thwarted yet again. Everything is fraying at the edges.

Our world is similar to the first century.

The pages of the New Testament remind us:
Everything is fraying at the edges:
Ruptures, rips, unsettling aches.
Anxieties, expectations, and relationship tensions.
Roman occupation in Israel
King Herod's power games
A famine in Jerusalem
Families displaced by greed.

And then, This beautiful story.
You know well, don't you:

Mary is supposed to be married to Joseph
But before they marry, she finds out she's pregnant.

After a long journey, there's no place to stay,
Mary has to give birth to her son in a stable.
A powerful and jealous king makes life miserable for everyone.

Strange men knock on the stable's doors in the middle of the night.

The stars shimmer, and Immanuel, God with us, is born.

Everything is fraying at the edges.

Nothing is what it is supposed to be. And we wait?

In the midst of this chaos and uncertainty, hope shines through a child.

The Prophet Isaiah, who knew something about fraying edges, invites us to "Look up!" Look beyond our circumstances in his moving poetry from Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
2 *The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,*
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
3 *His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*
He shall not judge by what his eyes see
or decide by what his ears hear,
4 *but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor*
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
5 *Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist*
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 *The cow and the bear shall graze;*
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 *The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,* (Cobra's den)
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. (Viper's nest)
9 *They will not hurt or destroy*
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah holds onto a stubborn hope: a hope that God is the one who struggles with us. A hope that God does not live far away but enters human space and time to struggle for life, love, and lasting dignity. It is the hope in God's coming to us this season. This is a hope that turns things upside-down and inside out. It is a hope that helps us see things differently.
A hope that gives stability,
A hope that brings strength
A hope that brings Wholeness
A stubborn hope that believes that things don't have to be this way.
When you feel like life is fraying at the edges.
When disappointment and unsettling aches come
When chaos seems to have won the day.

We wait and remember.

Blessed are you
when the expectations
of the holiday season
overwhelm you.

Blessed are you
when you don't know
when understanding escapes
when no explanation satisfies

Blessed are you who wait
Wait for the promise of hope

Wait for the Immanuel
Wait for healing and wholeness
Wait for the world to be made new.
Amen.

By Dale Carl Fredrickson