

An elementary school class had recently been learning about the patterns of some animals to hibernate during the winter months. One day their teacher turned to a little girl named Katelynn and asked her: “On what do hibernating animals exist during the winter?” Katelynn thought for a moment and then she said: “All winter long, the animals exist on the hope of a coming spring.”

Hope! We all need hope in our lives. Perhaps that is why this season of advent is so special for us. For it is a season of hope, of joyous anticipation, of looking forward to dreams and a promise fulfilled. Advent reminds us that even in the darkest days of our lives, we know that the night cannot last forever, and that the promised dawn of a new day will come.

There was a piano teacher at a Midwest university who was simply and affectionately known as Herman. One night at a university concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the guest artist left, when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked on stage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance of the same musical composition.,

Later at a reception following the concert, one of his students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully, without notice, and with no rehearsal. He replied: “In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day.

I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night, I added a second piece, and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years while in that camp.” “It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was from that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano and in freedom.”

Noted psychologist Dr. Victor Frankel did extensive studies with holocaust survivors after World War II, and came to this conclusion. He said that victims in concentration camps who gave up because they had no hope soon perished. It was only those who were able to hang on by faith, and cling to hope that there would be a future, managed to survive.

There is something in the human spirit—the Bible calls it faith—that enables individuals to overcome adversity and achieve a dream. I believe that is the message of the Christian gospel—of overcoming despair by hope, of turning defeat into victory, of transforming tragedy or disappointment into blessing and new life.

Hope is certainly the key message of our gospel lesson for today. We have the Advent figure of John the Baptist showing up again. We know that his purpose, or mission in life, was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. The key words in our text this morning are these: “The people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.”

John’s firey preaching reminded these Jewish folks of the prophets of old. They wondered aloud if he might be the one God had promised, the Messiah who would free them from their oppressors and restore their fortunes? Hope sprung anew in their hearts that it might be true, the Messiah had come at last!

John’s denial, however, must have disappointed them at first. Yet he held out this note of hope for them. “One who is more powerful than I **is** coming.....” In other words, the time is at hand. God’s promise will finally be fulfilled. The one you are waiting for has come at last! A new day is dawning!

Advent is the season of hope and promise. A time when we recall the promises God made to his people through the prophets—that he would send them a Savior. We recall that the people of Israel had been taken into exile in Babylon. They had been ripped from their homes and were slaves in a foreign land that worshipped false gods. They longed to go home! And to them the prophet Jeremiah offers these words of assurance: “For surely I know the plans I have for

you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Shouldn’t these same words ring true for us today?

God promises us a future with hope. God wants to give each of us hope for our lives, our families, our church, and our future. As we consider some of the challenges and disappointments of the past year, are there not signs of hope that we can cling to? Evidence of God’s care and His provision in our lives and in our life together?

Suffice it to say, this has been a rather difficult year. Many have lost their jobs, many have lost loved ones, the covid-19 virus continues to affect our daily lives, we continue to worship at a distance online. We may wonder what the future will bring and may be tempted to wring our hands in despair. Then Advent breaks in with its message of hope and a promise to remind us that all is not lost. That in fact there are signs of hope all around us.

Ok, so what are some signs of hope for us? Perhaps a new job or opportunity? A friendship renewed? Health restored after an illness? The birth of a child is always a sign of hope, of belief in the future. Baptism is a sign of hope as we remember the water poured upon our heads, grace upon grace, and with it God’s promise to love and care for us forever. God’s Word reminds us that we share a common Lord and a common baptismal calling. We have a common mission of sharing hope with a hurting world. Which may help us to think long and hard about how we will live out that calling in the coming year.

This community of faith that we are a part of exists to proclaim hope and to be a sign of hope for others. Consider how First Lutheran has shared hope with the people of our community in the past and how we continue to share hope with our neighbors in the present. By preparing food for Friendship house, collecting needed items for social ministry causes, adopting a family in need to buy Christmas presents for, donating food items to Neighbors in Need, making quilts for Lutheran World Relief....There are so many ways for us to reach out to others with the Gospel message of hope that we possess.

So how will we continue live in hope this Advent season? What are you looking forward to, hoping for, preparing for? What do your Advent and Christmas preparations look like? In the midst of the busi-ness of this holiday season, will you take some time for some personal reflection as you think about your own journey of faith and will you consider ways that you might offer the gift of hope to another?

As we count down the days until Christmas, perhaps it's time for us to magnify the Lord, to let the greatness of God's incarnated love shake us up and stir our souls. After all, when we truly magnify the Christ child, we no longer coo and cluck over a baby Jesus "meek and mild." Instead, our eyes and our hearts our opened to the enormity of God's gift to us, and what that gift means in our lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor who was martyred during World War II wrote these words after he had been arrested and imprisoned by the Gustapo: "Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits, one hopes, and putters about, but in the end what we do is of little consequence, for the door is shut and can only be opened from the outside."

The Good News of this Advent season is that in Christ Jesus, God has flung wide the door and unbarred the gate. There may be times when we may find ourselves still living as though the door to the future was closed. Then and always, God invites us to embrace the Good News of hope that is ours in Jesus—the one who has come and the one who is to come again. He is our hope, our future, our life. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.