

Anticipating Hope

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Scripture: Luke 21:25-36, Jeremiah 33:14-16

There are 34 million people living with HIV and AIDS; 2.6 million people are infected every year worldwide; 1.8 million people die from AIDS-related causes every year; 7,000 people are newly infected PER DAY globally. In Georgia, according to the Georgia Department of Public Health, 41,986 people were living with HIV and AIDS, with 66% of them living in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area. And in 2010, the total number for newly infected persons was 2037. With all of these statistics, fighting to defeat HIV and AIDS seems impossible. There is so much despair, so much desperation, so much uncertainty.

In today's scripture, we join Jeremiah as the Israelites were on their way into the Babylonian exile or already in exile. "The days are surely coming..." That's what our scripture says today. Now, I'll be honest, when I first read the lectionary readings for this week, I was a bit puzzled as to why these were the readings for THIS Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent. Things were not promising; they were not safe, they were not secure, there was no hope in sight. There was only despair and anguish, pain and sadness, tears and mourning. Where is Advent in this? In the face of this despair and terrifying language, where is our hope?

For the past three days, I have been attending an HIV and AIDS conference, here in Atlanta. During the conference, I was fortunate to hear stories from people living with HIV and AIDS. Most of them have come to a sense of peace and acceptance and have turned their despair into a source of strength. However, I also heard of newly infected people learning their status, whose feelings of despair were overwhelming.

I have a friend at home who found out during the summer that he is HIV+. I met with him for lunch one day and we talked about it. There was a real sense of terror in his eyes, mixed with sadness, anger, guilt, and shame. There was a sense that he felt isolated, alone, forgotten, and untouchable. He told me that he felt most isolated by the church; a place where he should feel supported and uplifted. The isolation reinforced his feelings of shame, making him feel that he had done something wrong, which he hadn't. However, the feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation remained. As we sat there, he cried and told me how he didn't know what would happen next. Before we left, I touched his hand and gave him a hug, if only to show him that he wasn't alone.

How many times have we been faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, with feelings of despair and grief, sorrow and pain too much for us to bear, confusion and uncertainty about what lies ahead of us? When have we cried out to God asking why, or mourned, or wept, or have been in utter despair? Our texts remind us of one thing...out of our human despair, a divine hope is born. This hope is hope in an alternative storyline for our lives; it is a hope filled with longing.

This is the hope that we need to live into. The Luke passage tells us to be alert, to raise our heads and stand up. The signs that Jesus talks about in Luke are not just something that shows the POSSIBILITY of what is to come, but speaks of the coming REALITY. Even in the midst of the hibernation and grayness of winter, there is a sense of hope.

Jeremiah uses the image of a righteous branch that springs up for David in his prophecy. There is hope here. Hope that brings with it a rebirth, not just of the royal Davidic line, but also hope that brings with it a rebirth of the people of Israel. In anticipating this hope, the Israelite people are called to reimagine their situation and trust in God's provision.

In this season of Advent, we are called to anticipate something new. We are called to wait on, anticipate, trust, and imagine a new alternative future that God is planning for us. We are called to long for God's alternative future. This hope is not an uncertain hope. This is a hope that will come. Remember what God said to Jeremiah, "The days are SURELY coming..." This is not a chance call, this is a certain call. Even with the Israelite community on the brink of destruction, Jeremiah calls out for the people to long and hope for God's alternative version. The days are surely coming when famines will cease. The days are surely coming when war shall be no more. The days are surely coming when sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, hunger, poverty, and violence will be no more. The days are surely coming when HIV and AIDS will be no more.

We are called to exercise the practice of anticipating hope this season. Instead of celebrating the mystery of the birth of Christ now, let us wait for and anticipate something new. Let us anticipate hope for peace, for joy, for a cure. In these days that will surely come, we long for these things which we anticipate. As we long for these things, we also find our longing in this table. A commentator stated that the communion table "is not just a table of longing, it is THE table of longing for all with deep longings, people who pray with Jeremiah for the days that are surely coming."

At the beginning of this Advent season, let us all come longingly to the table of Christ. Knowing that no one is barred; black, white, gay, straight, male, female, rich, poor, HIV-, HIV+. We are all one body in Christ and of Christ. Let us be open to God's alternative future. Let us welcome one another as full members of Christ's body, remembering, bringing the parts of the body together again. Let it be so. Amen and amen.