

“A New Beginning”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

December 4, 2011

Second Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Dr. Gary W. Klingsporn

First Congregational Church in Nantucket, MA

“It’ll never work!” “This will never work!” That’s what I said as I threw up my hands and sat down on the front porch step. “It’ll never work.” The moment of truth had come and it was depressing.

It happened on a Friday evening in December when Debra and I were first married. I was putting up our Christmas tree. I was out in the front yard nailing the tree stand to the bottom of the trunk of a Scotch Pine tree. Debra was coming home from work soon. I envisioned the tree standing majestically in our living room to greet her.

When I finished nailing the stand to the bottom of the tree, stood the tree up on the sidewalk in front of our house, and stepped back, I knew I was in trouble. The tree was listing badly, standing at nearly a 45-degree angle. That’s when I slumped down on the porch step and said, “It’ll never work.”

I sat there looking at the tree for a long while. For the first time I saw the gaping holes in it. Those holes *were not there* when we bought that tree! And the tree was fatter, the tip scruffier, the branches droopier and drier than I had realized. But hey, we were newlyweds on a tight budget. This was an “econo-tree.” We had picked it out in the dark. I got up and walked around the tree to look for “the good side.” There was no good side! I burrowed into the center of the tree to check the trunk. It was really crooked—worse than I thought. With the evening darkness closing in and Debra about to arrive home, I sat there and I said it one more time: “This will never work!”

What made that moment so painful is that I love Christmas trees! I have always loved Christmas trees. I love looking at them. I love fiddling with them and decorating them. I love a fresh-cut tree with a beautiful shape, with hundreds of lights placed as evenly as I can get them. I love ornaments carefully chosen and evenly distributed. I can get lost in a tree for hours. Debra says Christmas trees are the closest thing I have to a hobby besides reading.

So on that December evening, after the initial shock wore off, I decided to see if there was anything I could do to make this tree “passable.” I ripped off the tree stand, sawed the base of the trunk at an angle, and put the stand back on—three different times—to straighten the tree. Still leaning some, I took it into the house, put some old magazines under the legs of the tree stand—two or three inches of magazines under one leg, which meant I needed an inch or so of magazines under other legs. Looking better! But now, with so many magazines stuffed under it, the tree was unsteady. The whole tree swayed when I walked past it. So I went outside, got some bricks, and piled them on the legs of the tree stand. Then I wrapped a good stout wire around the trunk of the tree, strung it

over to a window sill and nailed the wire down. Standing straight now, that tree was going nowhere.

I went to bed that night, got up the next morning, a Saturday, and the tree was still standing. For hours I cut, trimmed, and pruned branches. I wired and spliced limbs up and down and over and around into the gaping holes. Finally, I put on the lights, ornaments, apples, red bows, and the star. By evening of the second day, the tree finally stood majestic in its own way. Not a “perfect” tree, but a beautiful tree, one that Debra and I will always remember as *“the tree that would never work.”*

Life is like that, isn't it? Life is good, but like that tree life is also bent, broken, full of gaping holes. Life is good, but it is also full of weariness, pain, and anxiety. There are times, more frequent than most of us admit, when we just want to sit down on the porch step, throw up our hands, and say, “It'll never work.” Will this ever get better? What do I do now? Will it all work out?

For you right now it may be: What about this ache in my soul? This pain in my body? What about our son's or daughter's depression or drinking? Or, I'm tired of hearing of one more sex abuse scandal, one more missing child, one more celebrity divorce, one more debate over too much debt and not enough taxes. Why's there so much suffering, evil, and injustice in this world? And what can I do about it?

Or you may be asking: What do I do with these regrets in my life—the “woulda's, coulda's, shoulda's” that haunt me from the past? Or, where will I spend my final days when I'm old? What will my health be like? Will there be enough money?

Maybe you ask, “Where are you in all of this, God? Where are you in the darkness?”

Sometimes we just need to sit on the step of the porch and wait in the silence.

The Advent season leading toward Christmas is about sitting on the step, waiting and watching. Last week the first words of Advent we heard from Scripture were the words of Isaiah, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! We need you, God! We need you to come into the broken places of this world to heal and restore” (Isaiah 64:1). Today, on this Second Advent Sunday, we hear other words from Isaiah: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her suffering is over” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

“Comfort ye....” They are words of hope and consolation spoken to God's people who were living as exiles far from home. Some fifty years earlier the enemy Babylonians had invaded Israel, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, burned the temple to the ground, and deported many of the Jews to Babylonia. For years they lived in exile. Israel's prophets understood this exile as punishment for Israel's sin and rebellion against God. Israel had wandered far from God and had lost their way. Five hundred miles of desert lay between Babylon and the heap of rubble Israel once called home. The people of God were alone in a wilderness place. They had plenty of reasons to say, “It'll never work.”

But at long last, when all seemed lost, God spoke. The poet-prophet Isaiah of the Exile came announcing a new beginning for God's people:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people....In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and very mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

This was a powerful word of promise that the exiles would soon be free. It is as if God would build a highway across the desert and lead God's people back home again to Judah and Jerusalem. God would make for them a way through the wilderness. God would make straight the crooked places, make level the uneven places, lift up the valleys, and make low the mountains, so Israel could return home.

Isaiah's words, as all of biblical faith, speak hope into the wilderness places of our lives. God always offers hope of a new beginning. God is at work where life is bent, broken, and filled with gaping holes. God comes into this world of guns and bombs, sickness and sadness, and dying. God comes into our loss and grief, our busyness and regrets, our divorce and cancer, and the suffering of those we love and care about. And God gently says to us: “Comfort, O comfort, my people.....”

When we sit down on the porch step, God sits with us. When we're ready to throw up our hands and say, “It'll never work,” God is there. In ways we don't even know, God stoops over the bent and broken places, the gaping holes and gnarled trunks of our lives. God rolls up his sleeves, and goes to work with saw and magazines, bricks and wire, to shape a new beginning.

The season of Advent is about our need for God and the new beginning God always offers us. In our Gospel reading this morning we heard the opening words of the Gospel of Mark. The words are simple: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The very first word of Mark's Gospel is *arche*, beginning. The *beginning* of which Mark speaks is the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ. The rest of Mark's Gospel tells the story of that good news of Jesus. Mark's opening words proclaim that we always stand at the place of a new beginning offered us in Jesus Christ.

Mark then quickly relates this new beginning back to those words from Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths....’” Mark says John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People went out to hear John and responded to his message. Mark makes it clear that John's role was to point to Jesus who is the new beginning God offers us.

But this new beginning is not without some work on our part. John the Baptist came preaching “repentance.” In earlier centuries the Christian church observed the season of Advent as a time of prayer, fasting, and repentance anticipating the coming of God. To prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth, the early church read these texts about John the Baptist and his preaching of repentance. Why? Because to have a new beginning with God means letting go of the past. Starting over again with God means turning away from

our past sin and brokenness, our old ways and unhealthy habits, and living the new life God wants for us.

For centuries the church in its wisdom and worship has taught the spiritual discipline of confession and repentance of one's sin. In a few moments as we approach the Table of our Lord we will confess our sin, saying,

“Gracious God, we have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin. Forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done, and things we have failed to do. Turn us again to you, and uphold us by your Spirit, that we may live and serve you in newness of life.”

Starting over again means that whatever the past has been, whatever our sin or brokenness, our mistakes, failures, or regrets, we confess them and let go of them. We turn from the past, knowing that God forgives us and that by God's power we can live a new life.

Whatever is happening in your life right now, the promise of Advent and of Christmas is this: “In the places where we are broken, in the dark holes where something is missing, in the silence of unanswered questions, the wondrous gift is given.”¹ Emmanuel, “God with us,” comes to us. Life can begin again for all of us. That's why we celebrate Advent as a time for a new beginning.

I don't know the “*It'll never work*” or the “*What now?*” places you bring with you this morning. I do know that we all have them. The good news of the gospel is that God sits with us there on the porch step and says, “Comfort, O comfort ye my people. . . . Prepare the way of the Lord. . . . Lift up your voice with strength, and say, ‘Here is your God!’”

When the light has grown dim and the darkness surrounds us, Jesus promises to come to us. If we're open and willing to let go of the past, God comes in God's own time and God's own way, rolls up his sleeves and goes to work.

That is the good news of Advent: “Comfort, O comfort my people!” “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .”

Notes

¹The words quoted are from Harriett Richie, “He'd come here,” *The Christian Century*, December 15, 1995, pp. 1205-06.