

Advent I Sermon: “The Light We Carry – The Light We Seek”

Hope in the Midst of Darkness

Advent always begins in the dark.

It doesn't hide the shadows of the world
or pretend life is brighter than it is.

It begins honestly,
with the longing of Isaiah's people
who walked through deep darkness,
and the quiet courage of Mary who faced a future
she could not yet understand.

And into that darkness, a single light is lit.

A candle, not a bonfire.

A flicker, not a spotlight.

Something small but stubborn.

This is how God teaches us about hope.

Hope rarely arrives fully formed.

It comes in whispers, in nudges,
in the quiet conviction that even here –
especially here – God is still moving.

Isaiah wasn't speaking to a triumphant nation;
he spoke to people who were lost, afraid, displaced,
unsure if they had a future at all.

Yet he dared to say,
"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."

That promise didn't erase their suffering.
It simply reminded them that God had not forgotten them.

Mary hears a similar promise.
She is young, vulnerable, without power or protection,
and the angel's words must have shaken her to her core.

But in her fear, the first thing she hears is:
"Do not be afraid... the Lord is with you."

The light that comes to her is not loud or triumphant.
It is intimate. Tender. Meant to be carried.

Advent hope almost always begins that way —
quietly, personally, offered to us before it is offered through us.

When tragedy hits our lives —
a diagnosis we never wanted, a loved one we lose too soon,
a phone call that breaks our heart —
it can feel as though the world has gone suddenly, painfully dark.

We wonder if the sun will ever rise again.
We wonder if we will ever feel like ourselves again.

And yet, hope has a way of slipping into tragedy
in forms we might almost overlook:
a friend who shows up without being asked,
a meal that appears on the doorstep,
a hand that squeezes ours in a waiting room,
a quiet prayer lifted on our behalf
when we feel too empty to pray ourselves.

Hope doesn't fix tragedy.
But it walks with us through it.
And sometimes the holiest thing we can do
is simply take the next breath, the next step,
trusting that God has taken it with us.

John's Gospel tells us, "The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it."

Notice the wording. The darkness doesn't vanish.
The light simply refuses to be extinguished.
Hope is like that – persistent, patient,
willing to burn even when the winds rise.

Even as hope persists, refusing to be extinguished by darkness,
we recognize that fear still lingers at the edges of our experience.

Fear can shrink our world until all we see is what might go wrong.
It narrows our vision, tightens our chest, and convinces us we are alone.
But God's answer to fear is always the same: "I am with you."

We hear it in the prophets,
in Gabriel's message to Mary, in Jesus' own words.
Fear may sit at the table with us, but it does not get the last word.

When fear crowds in, hope reminds us
to remember the faithfulness of God,
to breathe deeply and trust the One who has carried us before.

Hope does not always feel triumphant.
Sometimes it feels like trembling hands lighting a candle anyway.
Sometimes it looks like showing up when you would rather hide.
Sometimes it looks like letting someone else
walk beside you until your strength returns.

Many of us were taught, perhaps from a young age,
that hope is something we must summon ourselves,
a quiet determination to keep moving forward
regardless of the circumstances.

But Scripture teaches something far more beautiful:
hope is meant to be shared.

Jesus does not say, "You will become the light."
He says, "You are the light of the world."

We offer hope to others not only with grand gestures
but through the daily actions that say,
"You matter. You're not alone. I see you."

It may be a phone call, a visit, a prayer,
a kindness spoken at just the right moment.

Sometimes it is simply listening – truly listening –
in a world where so many feel unseen.

Hope grows when we share it.

The flame of the Christ candle is meant to be passed
from person to person until the room glows
with something greater than any one of us could produce on our own.

What we sometimes forget –
perhaps because we are used to being strong for others –
is that hope is not only something we give.

Hope is something we must allow ourselves to receive.

Mary is often remembered for her courage,
but part of that courage was seeking out Elizabeth.
She needed confirmation, companionship, reassurance.
And God provided it through another person.

We, too, are meant to need one another.

Hope is not a solo project.

Last Sunday in our confirmation class,
we asked the young people to share something
they had done that took courage during the past week.

All of their answers were inspiring –
doing things even when they didn't want to,

helping someone else,
conquering an assignment they thought they couldn't do –
but one answer truly touched my heart:
“I asked for help when I needed it.”

All of us need help.
All of us lean on each other.
None of us walks this life alone.

This is where hope begins –
not in pretending we are strong,
but in discovering we don't have to be.

Hope is believing that when we raise our hand, someone will notice.
Hope is trusting that when we speak our need, someone will respond.

Hope is the courage to say “I can't do this by myself”
and the grace of hearing someone else say, “You don't have to.”

And that is the hope we long to confirm in our young people –
not a hope made of perfect answers or flawless faith,
but a hope built on community.

A hope that says:
You belong here.
We will walk with you.
When you fall, we will help you up.
When you are lost, we will help you find your way.

When you need help, we will be there —

because that is what the Church is.

A gathering of people who carry the light for one another
when the flame gets weak.

The ways we both give and receive hope are woven together
in the fabric of our lives,
connecting us in moments both ordinary and profound.

As we recognize this shared journey —
where sometimes we are the ones reaching out for hope
and other times the ones offering it —
we begin to see what hope looks like among us today.

It looks like this sanctuary filled with people
who showed up even though not everything is perfect in their lives.

It looks like a single candle claiming that darkness does not win.

It looks like a community willing to walk with each other
through sorrows and uncertainties.

It looks like the gentle tug on your heart that says,
“There is more to come. God isn’t finished yet.”

It looks like Christ himself —
the light that enters the world quietly and refuses to leave.

Today we light the Candle of Hope, not because all is well,
but because God is with us —

in the tragedy we carry, in the fears we wrestle,
in the compassion we offer, and in the help we dare to seek.

Hope is our shared community – our struggles and joys.

Hope is knowing that we make a difference
because of the Christ light we carry.

Hope are the words from the youngest among
us as well as the oldest.

Hope is not the absence of darkness.

Hope is the presence of God in the midst of it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.