

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

An Advent Meditation

The year is 1942. A young, lonely boy stands at the limit of the wire in a German concentration camp. A young girl passes by. She too is moved by his presence. In an effort to give expression to her feelings she tosses an apple over the fence--a red apple. As he picks it up, it is for him a sign of life and hope and love.

The following day, thinking that he is even crazy for coming back to that same spot and for looking for the girl again, he returns. Hoping. And she returns too. And the scene is repeated. The girl returns with another apple and to see the tragic figure of the boy who moves her so.

For several days, the scene is repeated. And when the boy and his family are shuffled off to another camp, the girl and the apple and the few words that they have found to share with one another are alive in the mind of the young boy. He feeds on them with expectation and with a kind of silent hope in the midst of great adversity. From that moment on, the calming image of the sweet girl and of her smile and of the apple and of her words would appear to him in moments of anguish. They would be part of a vision to break his nighttime sweats.

Advent is a time when we also can carry a vision. Our darkness can never be compared with the darkness of Holocaust. There is no allegory here, no extended comparison. We do not live in prison and in the grip of the worst that darkness can produce. But we, in small and perhaps ordinary and limited ways, know darkness, the murkiness of life. And in the midst of all of our gray days, Advent is an apple and a smile and a vision of something more. It is the statement to all of us that God is not through. Something big is to be expected. Against all odds.

The year is 1957. Two adults are set up on a blind date in America. Both are immigrants. They sit in a New York cafe and linger over the meal. *And where were you during the war?* the woman asks. *Oh,* says the man, *I was in a concentration camp in Germany.*

I remember I used to throw apples over the fence to a boy who was in a concentration camp, she says. There is a pause. It is a silence of two individuals sitting in a comfortable place and suddenly

being drawn back, back into time. He has a sense of shock. He wonders before he speaks: “*And did the boy one day say to you, ‘Don’t bring any more apples. Tomorrow I will not be here.’*”

She has been prepared for something like this, but suddenly she is not prepared. It is too preposterous. “*How did you know that?*” she says-- perhaps faintly, perhaps softly, perhaps defiantly.

He looks at her, carefully, deeply, studying her face. And then he dares to say it, to frame the impossible, to give life to hope: “*I --I was that young boy.*”

Suddenly a little ray of hope in the midst of an ordinary day. Suddenly the memory of apples, the vision of the little girl, the boy bending down to pick up the precious red fruit, the tiny seed of hope, --all these burst and becomes a flood of light. Suddenly the whole dreary and broken world is turned for this one moment on its end!

Are we ready for the impossibility of hope? The small candles of Advent -- two this day-- shine in the darkness and refuse to go out. And that is the nature of hope. Hope is Zechariah's son wandering in to the wild and isolating space of wilderness and there-- in an impossible place for a revolutionary experience saying to anyone who would listen and eventually there would be many:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

The word of the Lord seizes him in the forlorn and rocky and barren wilderness until he cries out, quoting from Isaiah:

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’

Advent comes every year. Sometimes we think we know where it is headed and sometimes we do not. It can be like an apple and someone with a smile and a few words spoken across impossible boundaries of our life. It can arrive unheralded, impossibly in the midst of a desperate time.

But Advent is a tough, persistent season. And perhaps because of this, I believe that it does not just come at one point in the year. I like to think that Advent can show up in any time of darkness when hope is needed; when preparation and faith and fortitude are needed; when in the midst of darkness we seek a strength of spirit and resolve and courage that --in the midst of our wilderness-- refuses to banish hope.

Here is Henri Nouwen's take on hope

Hope means to keep living
amid desperation
and to keep humming

in the darkness.
Hoping is knowing that there is love,
it is trust in tomorrow
it is falling asleep
and waking again
when the sun rises.
In the midst of a gale at sea,
it is to discover land.
In the eyes of another
It is to see that he understands you.
...
As long as there is still hope
There will also be prayer.
...
And God will be holding you
in his hands.

And now we can say it in another way. Hope is the calming image of a sweet girl, the memory of her voice, her words. Hope is an apple picked up off the ground in a harsh and unforgiving time and the willingness to remember its taste at the first bite-- and the willingness to hold onto to that moment, that memory--and never forget.

A lone figure calls out to us from the isolation of wilderness this morning. A lone figure asks us to never forget. Never forget or let go of the possibility of God, the possibility of presence, of hope.

And in the midst of our lives right now, whatever the mood, the challenge, that lone figure--John the Baptist-- calls out to us, asking us to reach out, grasp, hope and never forget:

***the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'* (even you and me)**

Prepare the way of the Lord.

Something big is to be expected. Come, Lord Jesus.

In the name of God-- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.