

Advent Reflection

"Hope is a star that shines in the night, leading us on till the morning is bright. When God is a child there's joy in our song. The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid."

The first verse of 'Hope is a Star' (Voices United 7) for me captures one of the essential aspects of Advent and our lives as Christians: **hope**. The Christian virtue of hope is more than optimism or wishful thinking. It is rooted in the Hebrew concept of hope which is more akin to expectation or even certainty; just as we know with almost 100% certainty the sun will rise tomorrow, our hope as Christians is that we believe the Kingdom of God on earth will come in its fullness. The preparations of Advent to celebrate the birth of the Jesus at Christmas form us to be a people that work unceasingly to bring about the birth of Christ in our world today. Our hope empowers us all to be midwives of peace, joy, and love.

Jewish thought recognizes two kinds of hope. One is a hope that things will get better, even when we know it may not come to pass as we wish. This is called in Hebrew *tikvah*, and it may be identified as that which springs eternal in the human heart, the natural capacity to anticipate a better future.

The other kind of hope is a yearning for the better life that we know with certainty the future does hold for all humankind. This is called *tocheles*. The belief in the coming of the messianic era belongs to that latter kind of hope. Down through the ages, Judaism looked forward to the coming of the messianic era, a time of the fulfillment of humanity's desires for peace and harmony on earth. An era which we believe began at Jesus' birth 2000 years ago and continues to grow today; an era which requires our participation and work to enable it to flourish.

So there are two kinds of hope, with one built on the other. The first is as natural and as integral to human functioning as our heart and lungs; the other is a transcendent vision, essential to our faith, but requires some work on our part. To learn and grow in our faith, to prepare: this is the work of Advent.

Hope is more than a feeling or an abstract idea; it is a tangible part of the structure of all creation. As the Psalmist (59:17) says: "I will sing of your kindness in the morning." God has created a world of day and night. Night symbolizes darkness, pain, destruction, exile. Morning is a time of light, healing, restoration and redemption. In Judaism, each calendar day begins with night, at sunset. Every 24-hour period consists of a night followed by a day. In Jewish thought, nothing is accidental. God created the day to follow the night to teach us that there is always something good to look forward to, something to live for. No matter how bad the night, the sun always rises. God has imbued each one of us with a sensitivity to the possibilities that every single day carries with it. We know there is always hope, no matter how dark the night.

As I write this, there are now two Covid-19 vaccines which appear to be 95% effective. The light at the end of this dark pandemic is starting to shine brighter. We still do not know what is in store for us this Christmas in terms of get-togethers and celebrations but I hope and pray that the current crisis we are in ends soon. I also hope that when some semblance of normality returns to our lives, we don't forget the lessons we've learned from this pandemic: that we're all in this together, that so many people are essential to keep our communities going, and our need to be connected, to be part of community and the tremendous power we have to help each other and make life better for many. This Advent, may our hope console us, guide us and inspire us to build an ever-more Christ-like community.

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