

MYSTICAL HOPE

12/6/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA (*Livestreamed*)

Advent 2 (B): Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; ~~2 Peter 3:8-15a~~; Mark 1:1-8

The other day I came across a 45RPM record that I saved from my childhood. It has the infamous Disneyland script across the yellow label, and as soon as I saw the title, the music filled my head. "When you wish upon a star..." Remember that one?

I was working on a piece for a writing class, so I immediately began to analyze what this record meant to me and why I had kept it. As I thought about the lyrics, I realized how deeply embedded that message is in our lives—that all we have to do is wish upon a star and all our dreams will come true.

I think I've spent a great deal of time as an adult trying to undo that messaging, so that I don't feel so hopeless when my grand visions don't work out. And my sense is that many of us also pray that way. We have this twisted idea that all we have to do is sit in front of God and all our dreams will come true.

The author Cynthia Bourgeault calls this image of God the "fix-it" God. With that kind of mentality, it's easy to look around and ask, "Why isn't God making things right?"

I mention this because we're in the midst of Advent, which is often referred to as the "season of hope and expectation." But on the surface, it might seem like there's not much to be hopeful for these days. It is a broken and volatile world.

Reverend Bourgeault, who is also an Episcopal priest and well-respected for her writing and teaching, suggests maybe we're asking the wrong question. Maybe it's not what is it that we can have hope in? But what is it that we mean by hope?

In her book, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God*, Bourgeault explores the idea that the kind of hope offered on our faith journey isn't linked to outcome. She calls this "mystical hope," and explains that whether a person recovers from their illness or not, whether we get our dream job or not, whether our favorite candidate wins or not, we still reside in a hopeful mindset.

Actually, she would say that hope is much more than a mindset. Hope is a way of being. Bourgeault identifies three qualities of mystical hope:

- One, as I said, this kind of hope is not tied to a good, future outcome, because mystical hope doesn't depend on external circumstances;
- Two, this kind of hope is about the present moment, and being held in communion with the Divine; and...
- Three, true hope results in feelings of strength, joy, and satisfaction that come from within—despite the current circumstances.

Throughout the book, the author refers to places in scripture where these ideas are evidenced, such as when Job is working his way through the calamities that befall him. The Psalms are also great examples of this; the Psalmist will often declare the depth and breadth of their grief—their utter desolation—and then go on to say, "But in you, God, I find my strength."

Let me give you an example of how this might feel in your body. Think of a situation that's not going the way you want. Hunch up shoulders, let it get tight across your back...maybe even clench your fists and jaw. Now, take a deep breath, and hear those words again: "In you, God, I

find my strength,” and relax everything that’s tight; ease your grip on those circumstances; feel what it’s like to both know the situation hasn’t gone away, and, yet, that you can release the tightness. That is surrendering into the mystical hope of God.

This morning’s scripture from Isaiah—which is also echoed in our passage from Mark—starts in that place of comfort. The message in both readings remind us we have a God who demands much of us. But that the demand—the judgment—is actually a refining process. It’s not about God condemning us, but rather pointing us in the direction of how to feel closer to God. God’s judgment is actually a healing balm—repairing and renewing our relationship with the Divine.

Think of righteousness as way of being with God. That’s what mystical hope is all about—accepting the reality that all our dreams won’t come true, and, still, God will continue rejuvenating us. I think that’s what the Psalmist was getting at in today’s passage: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”

Although Albert Camus, who was a French philosopher and Nobel Prize winner, might not have identified mystical hope in his works, I believe that’s what he was speaking about when he wrote these words: “In the middle of winter, I discovered in myself an invincible summer.”

In the middle of this broken world, may you discover God’s invincible summer of hope within you; hope that is outcome-free, timeless, and reconnects you to your loving creator. Because when we live in hope, that hope ripples out into the world around us, pointing to—just as John the Baptist did to Jesus—pointing to something greater than ourselves.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 40:1-11

⁴⁰Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” ⁶A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

¹Lord, you were favorable to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

²You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin. Selah

⁸Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

¹²The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

¹³Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him,

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”