

And Hear the Angels Sing

Isaiah 2:1-5

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the very first day of a brand new church year. Curiously, the church year begins in the dark, with the light of day waning far too early and all of us huddled inside with glowing lamps and crackling fires, trying to push away the darkness. And the darkness outside mirrors the darkness we carry inside. In these weeks leading to Christmas, the two converge: the darkness of winter and the darkness of doubt, of fear, of insecurity—all of the very hardest parts of what it means to be a human being on this earth.

Into this darkness we declare that something new is coming, and so during Advent, we wait. We wait in the darkness, we wait in the absence, we wait in the silence. We wait for what we believe is right up ahead of us, on its way.

Like the shepherds who sat on a Galilean hillside in the darkest, inky black of night, we're waiting for something. We can't see it; we can't hear it, but we're stubborn in our insistence: it's on the way. We are people who will look back and remember what happened to the shepherds when, in their darkness and silence, faint notes echoed over the hills, lilting voices carried on the wind, ears perked up in the silence, and they heard the sound...of angels singing.

We're listening for that—something like that. In the meantime, though, we wait. And while we sit here in the darkness and in the silence, waiting, we do the very hard work—perhaps the hardest work—of living in anticipation of the in-breaking of God.

Each week in Advent we start worship with the lighting of a candle—one new candle, one little light in the darkness, representing something we cling to—desperately, sometimes—as we wait. This week it's hope.

Guiding our work through Advent are passages of scripture that are apocalyptic in nature. That is, they are words speaking of a future we cannot yet see and are not currently experiencing. Today's Hebrew text comes from the prophet Isaiah, chapter two. The passage may seem familiar to you because similar words are echoed in the book of the prophet Micah. We're not sure what's going on with the country of Judah when this prophecy is spoken; Isaiah is not really meant to be read as a chronological, historical record.

But if we read Isaiah, chapter two in its context, right after, say, Isaiah, chapter one, we may begin to get the impression that the situation into which these beautiful words are spoken is a dire one. Among other descriptors, chapter one says, "Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire..." The history of the Hebrew people isn't an especially idyllic one; they were constantly dealing with one crisis after another, trying to figure out how to be God's people while fending off enemies on every side and even from within.

Whatever the specific situation, it seems these words are spoken into a yawning darkness, ringing hope into a silence of desolation. They defy the present reality of war and need and fear. Listen: "[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and

their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Upon hearing those words, the people must have looked around them and sighed with disbelief. What is he talking about? We sit in tense silence, dismayed at the horror around us, and he dares to speak words of promise and future?

Isaiah seems to be saying to the people—and to us—that what we do today, how we *live* today, is determined not by the circumstances that surround us, but by what we believe about the future. Isaiah’s words speak hope-filled sound into desolate silence to remind us: *how we live today is determined not by the circumstances that surround us, but by what we believe about the future*. And sometimes, to gather that belief that flies in the face of current reality and defies all logic, we must listen carefully—pay attention—for sounds of hope, even faint, all around us.

I recently heard an episode of Radiolab that told the story of Alan Lundgard and Emilie Gassio. Two twenty-one year old art students, they were living the dream in a loft in Brooklyn, studying art and basking in the glow of young love. They’d met at a party only nine months before, and had, as Alan describes, “a moment.” On the program he waxes poetic about Emilie’s “iridescent” eyes, and when the interviewer says, “So you knew in that moment that this was more than just a thing,” Alan breaks in and says, “Oh yes, it was more than a thing. It was *the* thing.”

One day on her way to class, Emilie was involved in a traffic accident—she was on her bike, and she was hit by a huge truck. She was then in ICU, clinging to life. Alan called Emilie’s parents to hurry to the city, where all three of them kept vigil around Emilie’s bed, her parents splitting the daytime hours and Alan staying every night, all night long.

For weeks they waited for her to recover, with few signs of hope. Finally, the doctors deemed Emilie medically stable but completely unresponsive. Against Alan’s urgent insistence, her parents agreed she was probably not getting better, so they made plans to transport her to a nursing home in their hometown, where she’d likely live the rest of her life.

But Alan thought there was hope—in the middle of what seemed to be complete desolation. He insisted, “She’s in there; she just can’t get out.” “You have to give her a chance, you have to give her a chance,” he begged. Because Emilie had sustained some hearing loss in childhood and worn hearing aids before the accident, and because the doctors thought she’d lost her vision as a result of the accident, Alan, in a desperate attempt to prove to the doctors and to Emilie’s parents that Emilie could get better, tried something he’d read about in the story of Helen Keller. He traced out on her arm the words “I love you.” She immediately awoke and responded.

Alan had proof that what he’d hoped was true. But the doctors and Emilie’s parents still weren’t sure. So Alan tried putting in her hearing aids and turning them on. When that happened, when she could finally hear, suddenly everything changed. “Just by hearing his voice . . .,” Emilie said, “I came back.”¹

Where are you hearing hope today? Can you hear it in a song that paints a future, in a church bell ringing, in the sound of a baby crying, or in the words of grace spoken around the table of Christ? The sounds of hope are all around us. It’s our work this season of Advent to listen, to be ready—as the writer of Matthew’s gospel tells us—to welcome a future we cannot see but whose very idea we cling to with stubborn hope. Because what we believe about the future determines how we live today.

Theologian Frederick Beuchner writes, “In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen.... The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.... [I]f you concentrate just for an instant, far off in the deeps of yourself somewhere you can feel the beating of your heart. For all its madness and lostness, not to mention your own, you can hear the world itself holding its breath.”²

Today is the Advent Sunday of hope. Can you hear it?
Shhhh. Listen.

Notes

1 <http://www.radiolab.org/story/110206-finding-emilie/>

2 Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 2-3.