

“Just Hope”

Psalms 33:18-22, Lamentations 3:21-26,

Isaiah 41:17-20, Hosea 14:4, 8-9, Matthew 12:15-21 First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

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What is the opposite of evergreen? Nevergreen? This is the thought I had this week. And, the Isaiah passage in which God promises to bring the desert to life seems like taking a place that is never green and making it ever green. Indeed, some of the trees that are listed in that passage are evergreen trees. In the midst of our winter, we see the evergreen tree and are reminded that even in the frozen landscape around us, life continues. I believe this is the promise God makes: that the life God has given will be evergreen – that is it will never cease. So we decorate the church with evergreen trees and boughs.

Our anticipation of Jesus' coming, the advent of Jesus as an event remembered, reminds us of the servant God sends to bring the right ways of the Lord. We remember the advent of Jesus' time on earth, we celebrate it, and we decorate for it. We live after this first advent. We live between times – after this first advent and as we wait for the final advent of Christ's reign. As we hope in Christ, we depend on the steadfast love of the Lord and God's mercies which never come to an end, which are new every morning.

How do we build on this steadfast love and mercy? We look to the one who comes in the name of the Lord and the promise of hope he brings. Matthew describes Jesus as the one that will “proclaim justice to the Gentiles,” the people that are on the outs with God, and as the one that “brings justice to victory” or to reality. This proclaiming and bringing justice is central to the hope he brings. Jesus is suggesting that through him we can know justice and live it out as we follow him. And following him leads us to new life.

But what is justice? Too often we think of justice simply as catching and punishing those that break the rules. The word for justice in Hebrew, however, gives us a different perspective. This word is not so much about catching and punishing, but about setting things right. In ancient Israel when there was a problem, like someone being accused of lying or stealing for example, those in dispute would gather at the gate of the village with the elders or a judge. The conflict would be assessed and they would find a way to bring resolution that restored the relationships in the community.

This idea of justice at the gate reminds me of a story found in the Book of Virtues compiled by William Bennet. It's a story of a horse and a miser. In this village, a miser owned a horse and the horse was not taken care of well. The horse was nearly starving while the miser sat in his house and counted his gold. Many of the villagers noticed what was happening and shook their heads in disgust. Yet, they did not know what to do to change the situation.

Meanwhile in the village center, the town elders noticed the rope on the bell tower had frayed and the rope did not reach the ground. Since ringing the bell was the way to

call a gathering to deal with disputes and to dispense justice, the city leaders were worried someone short would not be able ring the bell and call the meeting. So they ordered a new rope, but in the meantime attached a vine to the rope to lengthen it.

It so happens that the miser's horse wandered through town that day looking for anything it might eat. Noticing the vine still had some green leaves on it, the horse began pulling at the vine and in the process rang the bell. The town leaders came immediately to see what dispute need to be addressed. When they saw the horse they were at first befuddled, but soon realized that it was appropriate that the horse call its owner to accounts. They brought the miser before the elders of the town and they proclaimed he needed to live up to his responsibility he had for the horse he owned. They found care and food for the horse and charged the miser accordingly. And justice was done.

This story reminds us that one element of justice is a person's responsibility. I think we can think of this in two ways – first, each person is response-able or able to respond and two, having the ability to respond, responding appropriately to circumstance is important. Jesus, in bringing justice to reality, is suggesting that we can respond and we have appropriate ways of responding – we are response-able and can rightly respond.

Jesus will spend much time in his ministry describing the ways of the Lord. He teaches us to love God and neighbor; he teaches us to even love our enemies. The Psalmist tells us the ways of the Lord are right and the upright walk in them, but the lost stumble. Following Jesus is moving from where it is never green, where life does not thrive, to the place where it is evergreen, where new life thrives. One way of describing what Jesus is doing is he is proclaiming justice and bringing justice to victory. He is proclaiming we are response-able and can choose to act rightly. In bringing justice to victory or to our reality, Jesus gives us this hope – that we are response-able and can do the right thing. He helps us see the right thing is to care for one another, to love God and neighbor, to produce the fruit of our response-ableness and our doing rightly, living out our right response to God, our responsibility.

This vision of not only hearing him proclaim justice but living into it through our responsibility is a vision of justice coming to victory, it is a just hope. Looking to Jesus' coming, whether the first or the second time, we look for how God sets things right. In between those times, now, we also see God setting things right through showing us the way, inviting us to use our response ability and to be responsible. The just hope of the present is in Jesus' disciples following Him and enabling this just hope to become reality now, and remains alive as his disciples hold fast to the just hope God gives us in Jesus Christ.