

“Rekindle Hope” by Julie R. Harley

Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-37

First United Church of Oak Park – November 27, 2011

It has been a difficult year.

We are disillusioned by just about everything.

Political gridlock. The usual parade of corruption and sex scandals.

Unemployment that won't budge below nine percent.

Real estate values that are running on empty.

Government leaders who are slicing budgets with hacksaws, usually to the detriment of social service providers like PADS and the Food Pantry.

The Colombia Free Trade Agreement passed, though our missionaries in Colombia – Mamie Broadhurst and Richard Williams – tell us it will deepen suffering for the poor.

Palestine's bid for statehood in the United Nations seems to be going nowhere, though leaders of both of our denominations have signed a letter supporting it.

Occupy movements are springing up like weeds in cities across the country, and also being cut down.

All of this has contributed to a profound mood of disillusionment . . . in our nation and among our church members. People who have invested themselves in the work of justice and social action are feeling discouraged and losing faith.

Hope can be a fragile thing. It burns like a flame, but without fuel, it dies.

And when hope dies, the world seems like a very cold and dark place, like a basement where you can't find the light switch. Every year, Advent begins in darkness.

Advent begins in the shadows, in the time of year when we have the fewest hours of sunlight.

Though we're surrounded by artificial lights and the cacophony of Christmas consumption that has been belting out “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” since Halloween, for people of faith – like us -- Advent is a time of quiet preparation.

The church year does not begin with “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree,” but with voices of disillusionment and despair.

Our reading from Isaiah is a lament, a passionate plea to God: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Please show up! Do something!

Our text from Mark comes from the end of Jesus' ministry, and he describes the coming end of the age with the language of apocalypse: “The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven.”

We begin Advent in darkness, with predictions of a cosmic cataclysm.

We have tried our best, but we are left feeling disappointed.

In this dark season . . . how is it possible to re-ignite hope?

Our hearts are broken. Our spirits are tired. Our good will is spent.

It is in this moment of darkness that Advent begins. And in Advent we learn the difference between a broken heart that is shattered into a million pieces . . . beyond repair --- and a heart that is broken open . . . ready to receive new life.

Have you seen the new Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial dedicated several weeks ago in Washington, DC? It shows the figure of Dr. King, the late civil rights leader, emerging from a huge stone monolith. He stands proudly, arms crossed, sermon manuscript in hand, and on the side of the sculpted stone is a quotation from his "I Have a Dream" speech.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

With this faith . . . we re-ignite hope.

We cannot rekindle hope through willpower, optimism, positive thinking, or our own efforts.

We cannot rekindle hope through a new product, a new politician, a new promotion, or a new computer platform.

Hope arises through **faith** . . . the faith of the generations who struggled before us, which we discover again for ourselves. The faith we carry from the present into the future for our children and our grandchildren and the next seven generations.

Hope arises through faith that acknowledges we are facing a mountain of despair. . . . not only in our nation, but in the villages of the West Bank in Palestine, among starving people in the Horn of Africa, in the chaos that reigns in Egypt and Syria and Libya and Iraq and Afghanistan, and the despair which burdens the thousands of families whose relatives have disappeared in Colombia and in Mexico.

Hope does not emerge from joy – it arises from darkness.

Hope does not spring from carefree hours – it swims to the surface from the depths of painful struggle.

Hope is not needed when life is good – it is chiseled from insurmountable obstacles and prized for the cost we pay to attain it.

Rachel Naomi Remen is a doctor who asks her patients to bring a small stone to the hospital when they come in for surgery. Dr. Remen then asks the patient to invite a small group of family members and friends who have a **heart bond** with him or her to come the night before surgery. They gather around the bedside and each person tells a story of a significant time when he or she needed strength and found it.

As each one concludes their story, she or he names a quality from that life experience and says, "I put encouragement into this stone." Or "I put hope into this stone." The stone is then passed on to the next person, who continues the process. The stone then becomes the patient's "courage stone" that s/he can carry through surgery.

The patient holds the stone and says these words from Psalm 18: *God is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer. My God is my rock in whom I take refuge.*

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

We rekindle hope by blessing one another. We rekindle hope by small acts, every day, which send waves of hope around the world.

Forty-five years ago, Robert F. Kennedy said this about hope: ***Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against***

injustice, he or she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope. And crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Each small action done with a spirit of love becomes a ripple of hope.

God gathers together our small acts of blessing and uses them to shape a new world. In the words of Isaiah: “We are the clay. You are the potter. We are all the work of your hand.”

We don’t create the ripples. We don’t hew the stone of hope from the mountain of despair. All we do is follow in God’s path each day, and let ourselves be used for God’s purposes . . . which are always greater than our own.

Thomas Merton said, “**All the good that you will do will come not from you, but from the fact that you have allowed yourself – in the obedience of faith – to be used by God’s love.**”

Think of the ripples of hope we have witnessed this year . . . even in a time of disillusionment and despair.

- The liberation movements of the Arab Spring
- The abolition of the death penalty in Illinois
- The legalization of civil unions in Illinois
- The repeal of the federal Don’t Ask Don’t Tell rule in the U.S. military
- The executive order to bring all American troops home from Iraq by the end of this month.
- This Thanksgiving, for the first time in four years, the Food Pantry did not have enough money to buy turkeys for our clients. More than 350 families came to our church basement the Saturday before Thanksgiving, needing food. The demands grow, even as federal funds shrink.

Yet our hope is rekindled. On the day before Thanksgiving, more than 100 turkeys were donated – unsolicited – to the food pantry. Some came from small businesses, some came from anonymous individuals, and one came from a boy at Whittier School who donated the turkey he won in his school’s Turkey Trot. All of the 116 people who came here on Thanksgiving Eve went home with an unexpected gift. Small actions done with a spirit of love.

New light is emerging. New light is streaming into the darkness of these Advent days. As Jesus told us, a new age is dawning.

We rekindle hope from the depths of despair as we gather around this communion table. As we celebrate the faith in Jesus Christ that survived even death on the cross.

Christ’s body was broken on that cross, but it was not shattered in pieces. It was **broken open for others** . . . for you and for me and for all of those like us who yearn for rekindled hope. As long as Christ remained in a human body, his reach was limited. When his body was broken open for the sake of others, his power became a gift that touches and embraces the whole world.

A candle that has been extinguished can always be re-lit, as long as it still has a wick and enough fuel to feed the fire. In a few minutes, we will recite those ancient words that affirm once and for all that God re-kindles hope in the cosmic event of Jesus' resurrection to new life:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Here is the stone of hope that faith has hewn from the great mountain of despair!

Here is the stone of hope in the power of Jesus Christ, hewn from all that is hard and unyielding, rising to new life from despair and disillusionment, birthing the strength we need to walk God's path, guided by the Holy Spirit.

In this Advent season, we're not waiting for Christmas. We are not waiting for Dec. 25 – which isn't Jesus' actual birthday, anyway. **We're waiting for Christ.** The day when Christ will come is like a surprise party – no one actually knows when it will happen. This is why Mark's gospel warns us to "stay awake."

The gospel calls us to be watchful, to practice expectant waiting through these dark Advent days. I urge you to look for the light in every day . . . to be attentive to moments of God's presence in your life and in our life together . . . leading us to Christmas Eve, when we will declare John's words that rekindle hope for every age: *The light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* Amen.

Charge:

Stand up for what you believe.

Do something to improve the lot of others.

Strike out against injustice.

Send forth a tiny ripple of hope every day.

Let yourself be used by God's love.

Benediction:

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace
as you trust in him,*

so that you may overflow with hope

by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.