

WAITING FOR THE LIGHT

*Mary Ann Pastuck
Camrose United Church
December 11, 2005*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 – The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
John 1:6 – 8, 19-28 John testified to the light.

Perhaps no other week in Advent is as long as the third week. For those of us who live north of the equator, the days have become quite short now, and the nights long. The shortest day of the year is only 10 days away. Those who live in the upper most parts of the globe may have an advantage during Advent. The darkness is around them for a longer period of time, and any light is a rare and great gift. It is week three and we are still waiting, waiting, waiting. Somewhat surprisingly, our companion this morning is once again John the Baptist. He too is waiting. The local clergy surround him and hurl questions his way. In contrast to last week's revivalist preaching, John isn't saying much this week, perhaps because he knows so little about what is to happen. There is anger, or perhaps frustration, in the voices of his interrogators, and it is understandable. They, too, have been waiting for the Messiah, the one who would come and redeem the people of Israel. If it is John, they want to know, or if John know who it is, they'll take that as well. Perhaps they despair of the crushing poverty around them, the aggressive violence of the Roman Empire, or all the brokenhearted people who show up in their offices day after day, week after week. If the light is to come, they want it to come now.

Not only is Advent lengthy and dark, there is a tenderness, a longing in Advent. This time of the year when we scurry about buying gifts for others, making our final charitable contributions, putting up our Christmas decorations, we somehow become attuned to the world around us. Perhaps it is because there is so much activity. Or maybe there is a Christmas nostalgia that overtakes us, as a distant childhood memory calls us back to simpler, more innocent time. Whatever it is, during these long days of December the world around us can appear even more fragile than usual, more delicate and more broken. Human service organizations report record numbers of volunteers and donations in the days leading up to Christmas. It is silly, of course, the homeless are still homeless in July, the cold are colder in February, the elderly won't be any younger when March arrives and the hospitals are filled with the sick every month of the year, but at Christmas we who are normally hard-edged become more tender and our hearts feel more for the pain of others. One thing we know is that the more we are exposed to the wounds of the world the more never ending they become. Emotionally, it may be far easier to pen ourselves up, to stay in denial, to remain full of good cheer and walk down the sunny side of the street. Yet, a bright disposition can only take us so far. A glance at the evening news or daily headlines and our hearts may well burst wide open with the pain of it all. Back in December of 1984, a bunch of famous singers got together to raise funds and awareness for a famine that was ravaging much of sub-Saharan Africa. Perhaps some of you remember Phil Collins voice bursting forth from your stereos:

“At Christmas time it's hard, but when you are having fun
There's a world outside your window, and it's a world of dread

And fear where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears
And the Christmas bells that ring there are the clanging chimes
Of doom. (*Do They Know it's Christmastime at all?*)

Thus our December awareness of the world's plight is a paradox that becomes difficult to puzzle out. If God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, why is there so much pain in the World? Year after year the world seems to be getting worse. The day after Christmas in 2004, a devastating Tsunami washed away some 200, 000 people and shattered the lives of millions more, not to mention the damage done to the economies of the region and ecology of the Indian Ocean. People who study these things tell us that close to 30,000 people are dying of malnutrition or preventable disease everyday. Through the year there has been Hurricane Katrina, a horrific earthquake and mudslide, a flue pandemic is possible probable and most recently the hostage taking. Why are there so many who need our care and compassion? Isaiah knew this pain well. These may not be so much different from the questions that the scribes and Pharisees fling at our friend John. They are understandably fed up. Their center question is: Who are you? It's a good question and will remain a central question throughout the fourth gospel. They are interrogating John, but the real questions, the one they are interested in, is not so much who John is, but who is the one he speaks of, who is the one who will follow him and what is the nature of this light that is promised? John doesn't have the exact answer. Who holds the exact formulas to search out the holy mysteries of suffering, death, and redemption? John doesn't. What John does have in abundance is a faith, a trust, a confidence, and a hope that has been passed down to him through the generations. John's hope is in the God of Israel, Isaiah's God, who has fulfilled past promises, and who has once again been promised to restore the world, to bind up the broken hearted, to set the captives free, and to bring liberty to the oppressed.

In an interview on the radio, a featured psychologist at a major research university said all the data showed that the single biggest key to living a healthy life is staying optimistic. "Optimists have less stress, better relationships, and healthier diets," she said. "They tend to have a sunnier outlook on the world, which translates to positive self-esteem and self-confidence. "Optimists", she quoted in a survey as saying, "generally believe things are getting better, humanity is improving the world's problems are being solved." And then, to clinch her point, she said, "We also discovered optimists tend to live longer than other people!" John the Baptist and Jesus could not have been optimists. Both died in their 30's. While individual Christians may be delightful to be around, cheerful and positive, Christian hope is fundamentally different from optimism. Christian hope looks eyes with devastation of the world around it, and readily acknowledges that things may not get better. Christian hope does not bury its head in the yuletide cheer and artificial lights, but like an Advent wreath glowing stronger and brighter each week, this hope pushes its way into the brokenness of the world, clearing a path in the wilderness so the true light might burst into the darkness. Christian hope has the courage to work for Isaiah's vision of justice, healing and liberation, trusting that such working is a testimony, a witness to the light.

Tom Long tells a story about Rabbi Hugo Grynn who was sent to Auschwitz as a little boy. In the midst of the concentration camp, in the midst of the death and horror all around them, many Jews held onto whatever shred of their religious observance they could without drawing the ire of the guards. One cold winter's evening, Hugo's father

gathered the family in the barracks. It was the first night of Chanukah, the Feast of the Lights. The young child watched in horror as his father took the family's last pat of butter and made a makeshift candle using a string from his ragged clothes. He then took a match and lit the candle. "Father, no!" Hugo cried. "That butter is our last bit of food. How will we survive!" "We can live for many days without food," his father said. "We cannot live for a single minute without hope. This is the fire of hope. Never let it go out. Not here. Not anywhere."

On this third Sunday of Advent we, in the North, gather in the darkness of the long nights and suffering of the world. We are surrounded by the never-ending questions of pain and sadness bearing down upon us, a world groaning for restoration, well-being and quality of life. We light our candles and say our prayers, and wait for the coming Christ, the light that will never go out, the light that helps us live the joy of this Advent week.

And we sing *Herald, Sound the Note of Gladness*.