

*Advent: The Missing Season*  
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major  
on Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:7-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15a & Mark 1:1-8  
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Casper, Wyoming

Each summer for most of the past 10 years our family has taken a weeklong canoe trip in the wilderness lake country of Ontario. We pack our car full of food, packs, sleeping bags and tents and drive for hundreds of miles until we reach the shore of a sparkling blue lake at the end of a road. Even though we leave our house at about 4 in the morning, it's usually late in the afternoon when we arrive, so we try to be quick about packing the canoes full of gear and paddling for an hour or two to get to the quiet spot where we will camp that first night. The first lake can be a little busy, with motorboats, a summer camp or two, and a few cabins and lodges, so we usually try to get over at least one portage that first day. We carry our canoes and packs several hundred yards through a forest of birch and pine trees, leaving any hint of busyness or cell phone reception behind us.

On one of these trips we had six people all together, including everyone in our family plus Nancy's sister and our niece in two canoes. We arrived at camp that first evening, the kids setting up the tents on a bluff overlooking the lake and the adults cooking dinner and bear-bagging the food. I was leaning over the camp fire in the fading light, listening to the haunting sound of a loon calling somewhere across the lake, when one of the kids ran over to me. "Dad, do you know where we put the rainfly to the big green tent?"

At that point I knew there wasn't much point in searching. We had left one essential piece of our camping gear back in the car. If you are camping in the Rockies you might make it through an entire week without rain, but there's a reason why there are so many lakes in central Ontario: it rains a lot! That first night of the trip we kept our rain parkas handy. The next morning Nancy and I did our best impression of a flatwater canoe racing team and retrieved the missing rainfly. The extra hours of paddling were well worth it because, as I recall, we had a lot of rain that week.

Is there something you are missing in this busy season in the weeks before Christmas? I often marvel at the wisdom of the church calendar; it's uncanny how often it seems to be true that we are missing the parts of our faith that are the focus of Advent. Advent is a season that is rich with good news for us, because it is all about things that are most often missing from our lives: God's hope and peace.

Hope. Peace. We use these words a lot. In fact, if we listen to the news or buy greeting cards we probably hear them more outside of the church than inside. But God's hope and peace goes much deeper than the way we usually use these words. God's hope and peace sustain us in a different way than even the most sincere greeting card expression; they are rich with meaning and, in turn, they ask more of us.

The first truth about God's hope and peace, is that God wants us to grow. God has hope for us to be transformed into God's new creation. We find God's peace as we are transformed into God's new creation. This is what John the Baptist is talking about in our Gospel reading.

Sometimes growing into God's new creation means adding something new, like joining a new group, such as a church, an AA group, or a choir. Sometimes it means letting God transform us by approaching the things we're already doing in a new spirit. We can grow into a new creation by building new or stronger relationships or simply by giving thanks in a new way for what we have.

The second truth about God's hope and peace is that they come to us as a community. A few minutes ago our choir sang these words from Psalm 85: *Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.* God's saving love is near to us when we gather together as God's people. God has made a covenant with us, as a community. We hear God's word through each other and with each other.

This is because God's hope and peace are for everyone. In our reading from 2 Peter we heard this good news: *God is patient with you.* This brings to mind an expression I heard when I was growing up.

When I was growing up, in the fair state of Ohio, many of my friends used an expression I rarely hear in Wyoming. They put the word *you* together with the word *all*. The result was "y'all", as in "Y'all come over to our house after church today." Our teachers would frown on this, but for 2 Peter and the other books in the New Testament, my friends were completely correct: 'you' always means "you - all". 'You' always refers to a group of people. *God is patient with all of you, not wanting any to perish, but wanting all people to come to repentance.* God's hope and peace come to us as a community because God intends salvation to come to all people.

Our reading from 2 Peter leads us to the third truth about God's hope and peace. *With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness.* The goodness in our lives doesn't arrive on our time schedule. Sometimes great things seem to happen overnight and sometimes it seems to take forever for something truly good to happen.

We don't like this because it makes us realize we aren't in control of when things will happen. We have very little control over the future and we can't do anything about the past. But if we are willing to receive it, this truth is a gift because it helps us pay attention to both the goodness and the real needs of today, instead of fretting about what happened yesterday or what we want to happen tomorrow.

In 2 Peter we read these words: *strive to be found by him at peace . . . and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.* This is not the kind of peace and patience that blindly ignores real problems that need attention. God's peace brings mercy and truth together; God's patience brings righteousness and peace together in our lives this day.

The fourth, and probably the most important thing, to understand about God's hope and peace is that they come to us especially in our times of greatest need. This is completely backwards from the way we usually think. Sometimes it seems hope and peace are for those who have the greatest chance of getting what they want. In fact, God's hope and peace are about people who seem to be in a really bad place getting something they may not even realize they need.

If you are reading the book of Isaiah it's helpful to understand that Isaiah is actually three books put into one. The first book runs from chapters 1-39 and was written about 750 years before Jesus' time. The second book includes chapters 40-55 and was written 200 years later. The rest of the chapters make up the third book. This is important for our reading today for two reasons. First, it's important to know our reading from chapter 40 is the opening of this second part of Isaiah. Second, these prophetic words are being delivered to a group of Israeli exiles who had been held captive by the Babylonians for 40 years. These exiles have lost every reason to think that they will ever return to their homeland. They have no expectations of freedom and independence.

This is where the revelation of God's hope and peace comes into the world. The prophet tells of God's hope and peace: *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.* The prophet proclaims that even though people may be weak and fade like grass the word of our God will stand forever. God's hope and peace are not based on what we possess, they are based on the love God has planted deep in our hearts.

Here is a picture of God's hope and peace. Hope is two parents committing themselves to teaching a tiny Sunday School made up of just four or five children. Peace is the conviction in their hearts that they are doing the right thing, even though it would be much easier to join the megachurch and let someone else teach their children. But these parents come to church every week, ready to teach, with God's hope and peace planted firmly in their hearts. Children enjoy the class because the teachers are committed and prepare diligently. More children begin to attend. More teachers join in the work. After a few years the Sunday School has grown to 15 or 17 children. This is called success. We really like this part of the story, but God's hope and peace were at the very beginning, when there was no certainty of success. As near as I can tell, this is what has happened with our Sunday School in the last several years.

God's hope and peace invite us to grow in new ways. God's hope and peace are for everyone, so they come to us as a community. God's hope and peace help us pay attention to the needs and the goodness of this day. God's hope and peace come to us especially in our times of greatest need.

Variety is one of the great strengths of our congregation. We don't all dress the same or work at the same kinds of jobs or live in the same neighborhood. As we enter these weeks before the Christmas holidays I realize that we bring a great variety of needs and gifts.

Some have just enjoyed Thanksgiving holidays with lots of family and friends crowded around a dining room table. Some of us had a difficult Thanksgiving, because we were missing family or friends. Some are decorating homes for the Christmas holiday. Some of us are mostly concerned about whether we will have a clean, warm place to live next month or next year. Some of us have calendars full of activities. Others spend too many hours alone, feeling trapped by isolation or the weather.

But regardless of what we have or what we don't have, I think there are a few things that all of us are missing. We are all in need of more hope and more peace. For you this year, may Advent be a season of receiving things each one of us needs: God's hope and peace.