

Hope Beyond Fear
Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9
November 30, 2014
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

Seventy years ago tomorrow, a young German priest began writing a series of reflections on Advent. That's not in and of itself an unusual thing -- that's what clergies do, but in this case the priest sat in a SS prison cell in Berlin awaiting execution. He was handcuffed as all of his fellow inmates were who had been incriminated in a failed plot against the life of Adolf Hitler. But he had figured out in the midst of his being handcuffed how to write and he began his reflections with these words, "More and on a deeper level than before, we really know this time that all of life is Advent."

Father Alfred Delp was a Jesuit martyr and priest and mystic. He was training for the priesthood during the period of the Nazi rise to power, and his very powerful encounter with God caused him to move into positions of opposition to the Nazi regime very early on, an opposition that led him into a resistance movement that eventually led to his arrest. Today as our church begins a new year, we have the opportunity to again remember the stories around Advent, this wondrous season of preparation when we have the opportunity to reflect, to ponder, to wait as we prepare ourselves for the coming again of the incarnate one.

As is our custom here at Metropolitan, we'll follow the lectionary readings throughout this Lenten cycle, so these will be verses, passages that are very familiar to you if you have been here over the years and in most churches because we all read the same lectionary. But our through theme for this Advent season is going to be reflecting on the lives of the mystics. Those people in our church tradition who have had very powerful encounters with the reality of the risen God and who call us into a space where we can also encounter the power of the Risen Christ.

Some of these mystics were great theologians, but many of them were not. But they are great teachers in helping us move from talking about who God is to a place of experiencing who God is. And the first of these that we're going to start with today is Alfred Delp, a fairly modern one.

II. "Who works for those who wait for him."

Most mystics have a deep appreciation for the mystery of the Incarnation, how God chooses to become flesh and to live among us with transforming power. And Father Delp was no exception. He did most of his writing on the subject of Advent, preparing ourselves for the reality of the incarnation. Advent begins with a looking forward at the time in which Christ will come again and then over the course of the weeks of Advent, we shift our focus backwards as we remember Christ coming at Bethlehem initially.

We echoed some of that movement in this beautiful carol that the children just sang with us, in this last verse that Charles Wesley wrote, “For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophets seen of old, when with the ever circling years shall come the time foretold. When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling and the whole world send back the song that now the angels sing.” In other words, right now the angels are the ones singing praises to God, but in the days to come the whole earth will be joined under God’s power to sing God’s praise, and as we start Advent, we start looking towards that time.

Our passage from Isaiah this morning is about waiting in hope, and waiting in many ways is what the Book of Isaiah is about. From the very early chapters of Isaiah when Isaiah talks about waiting for the time in which God will reveal God’s self to us to the middle chapters where the prophet is waiting for the time that God will call God’s people out of captivity and exile and back to their home in the Promise Land, to the wondrous passages where the prophet talks about waiting for the suffering servant who will destroy death and destroy the power of sin on our lives, all of it is about waiting in hopefulness for the work of God.

For Isaiah, that hope is rooted by looking backwards at how God has acted in our past. There is wondrous, rich imagery from the Exodus event as Isaiah remembers the power of God to transform and then points us forward to the time when God’s transforming power will come to fruition in the final days when God will usher in the kingdom. Advent is the season where we remember that promise that God will draw all history to a close and usher in a kingdom of justice and peace for all.

As Christians, we remember how God became incarnate in the child of Bethlehem, and that gives us hope in the promise that Christ has given us that He will come again in power and glory. As Father Delp wrote, “There is no waiting without hope. The heart receives the delightful warmth --” I love this phrase, “--receives the delightful warmth known to those who wait with a certitude that the One is coming and has already set out on His way.”

III. As you wait for the revealing

So, Advent is the time of hopeful waiting. But it’s not a passive waiting. It’s not just sitting and waiting for God to act. It is a hope that invites us into the process of building the kingdom that God will usher in.

We see this in Paul’s wonderful letter to the Corinthians from our lectionary this morning where he tells the church at Corinth that “the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you so that,” listen, “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus.” What that means is that because we have the goal of the Second Coming in our sights, that gives us the power to engage the world right now in some new ways. Paul wants us to understand that knowing that God is going to win the

battle ultimately, gives us the hope and persistence to continue in our work to transform the world.

The promise that Christ will come again means that as hopeless as situations sometimes appear, as intractable as problems sometimes appear, there is an endgame, there is a final day when all of them will be resolved so that as intractable as homelessness feels to us, there will be a day when there will be no homeless people. As intractable as the struggle to eat is and to provide all people with necessary food, there will be a day when there will be no hunger. That as intractable as injustice appears in our society and around the world, that there will be a day in which there is no injustice and that God's peace and justice rules the earth. And that promise, that hope, imbues all of the work that we do with power and purpose and meaning.

It meant for Father Delp that in the midst of the Nazi regime that was sweeping his country, that there was hope in resistance, that the forces of darkness would not prevail. That hope shaped how he engaged his ministry, and as hopeless as it seemed to be fighting that wave of Nazi domination, he could look with Advent eyes at a God who had promised a different sort of world and allowed him to ground himself in that promise as he worked for that world.

Last weekend I joined our youth group as they went to see the newest *Hunger Games* movie. And for those of you that have not encountered the *Hunger Games*, it's a trilogy of books that is being made into films that's a dystopian American future in which an oppressive government rules this country and the actions of one small, seemingly insignificant girl light the fires of a rebellion that sweeps across the land. At one point in the story, the president of this state, President Snow, shares with another of the book's characters, and he says, "Hope is the only thing that is stronger than fear." "A little hope," he said, "is an effective tool. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine as long as it is contained."

A lot of what we do as individuals and as a nation is fueled by fear, and hope is the counterbalance to fear. Hope is the only thing that is stronger than fear. Advent hope is about hope and trust in a world that we can't see, but that God promises us and gives us eyes for as we move towards it with faithfulness and patience.

IV. Ferguson

Dear friends, I want to suggest that the peaceful protests that are happening in Ferguson this week and around the country in support of Ferguson are a sign of hope. They're a sign of Advent hope that systems of injustice can change, that God's spirit is at work among us as we wait for the Second Coming, empowering us to be part of that change, that the Holy Spirit has given each of us the gifts that we need to be part of that change. The protests in Ferguson are an acknowledgment that our justice system does not work for everyone the same way and they are a call to rectify that system, to change the system so that it starts to reflect the justice of the kingdom that God has promised us.

The protests, I want to suggest, are not about Michael Brown. They're not about whether or not Officer Darren Wilson should have been indicted. They are about righting a system that works better for some of us than others. The protests are not an indictment of the police. Law enforcement as we all know has an incredibly hard job to do and that, by and large, they do that job very well. But the role of the police by definition is to maintain the established order, and we need to acknowledge that that order works better for some of us than others. If you are like me, an educated, heterosexual white man, the system works very, very well. Right? In part because people who looked like me helped put the system in place. But if you are a woman maybe on a college campus, if you are a person of color in Ferguson, Missouri, if you are a member of the GLBTQ community, that system does not always work quite as well. In my world, the police are always the good guys. That is not always the case for people who are not like me.

Our call, dear friends, is to be part of a movement that starts to challenge those systems when they don't work the same way for everyone. That challenge starts in our own hearts and minds as we reflect on those places, in those dark shadow places in our own psyches that resist people who don't look and sound like us. It then ripples out as we look at relationships within our church community, within our city, within our country, and within our world as we take what we know about ourselves and try to turn that into learning for the people around us and change for a system that is not working. Ferguson is not about the specific instance of Michael Brown's death. And we can get caught up in endless debates about whether or not that shooting was necessary, justified, whether the policeman should've been indicted or not. We don't have the information, and anything that we talk about in that regard is utter speculation. And my wife will tell you, I hate speculation, which is of course why I went into theology! What those protests are about is that young men of color seem to be killed at a highly disproportionate rate. There's some part of our system that is broken and that we need to look at, we need to shine the light of the Holy Spirit on and start to work to change. That's hard and that's scary work, but it is who we are called to be as an Advent people, a people of hope who know that systems can change because the Holy Spirit is always at work and the Holy Spirit will ultimately triumph.

V. Conclusion

While Father Delp was in prison, the Gestapo offered him his freedom if he would renounce his Jesuit orders and just join the German community. He refused, of course, and his sentence of execution was carried out on February 2nd 1945. Father Delp's body, along with the bodies of all the prisoners connected with the July 20th plot to kill Hitler, were cremated and by order of Heinrich Müller, the ashes were scattered across the sewage fields around Berlin.

As Father Delp walked towards the scaffold that morning, he was accompanied by the chaplain of the prison. And as he approached the foot of the scaffold, he leaned over to

the chaplain and said to him, "In half an hour, I'll know more than you." That's what Advent hope looks like.

Amen.