

Sermon, November 28, 2021  
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

“A Promise Fulfilled”

Some years ago, I was at LaGuardia Airport waiting to board a flight to Florida to visit my parents. In front of me stood a woman with long grey hair tied back in a ponytail. Ever since then I have kicked myself for being too shy to strike up a conversation. When she turned enough for me to see her face, I realized I was standing next to Jane Goodall. For those who may not recognize the name, she is best known for the many years she spent in the jungles of Tanzania studying the behavior of chimpanzees. She is also a naturalist, and environmental activist- and internationally known as an ambassador of hope.

Although she recognizes the realities of the world today - the pandemic, the threat of terrorism, political unrest here and abroad, and the environmental crisis, to name just a few problems, she still clings to hope for this planet. She defines hope as that which “enables us to keep going in the face of adversity. It is what we desire to happen, but we must be prepared to work hard to make it so.” She then offers four reasons for hope in this day and age. The first being the amazing human intellect. She states that “we are very clever and very creative. And like all primates and many other animals, we are very curious creatures. And our curiosity, coupled with our intellect, has led to many great discoveries in many fields because we like to find out how and why things work the way they do, pushing the boundaries of our understanding.”

This is coupled with the recognition that our amazing intellect has also gotten us into a lot of trouble, caused by a mixture of greed, hate, fear, and desire for power that has caused us to use our intellect in unfortunate ways. But the good news is that an intellect that is smart enough to create nuclear weapons and AI is also, surely, capable of coming up with ways to heal the harm we have done to this poor old planet.”

The second reason she offers has to do with the resilience of nature. Although there are ways that we have pushed nature almost to the breaking point, there seems to be within nature a will to live, and she sites that “There’s a kind of built-in resilience - as when spring brings forth leaves after a bitter winter of snow and ice, or the desert blooms after even a tiny amount of rain falls. And there are seeds that can germinate after lying dormant after many years. They contain that tiny spark of life just waiting for the right conditions to release its power. It’s what Albert Schweitzer called the will to live.”

Her third reason is the power of young people. “What gives me hope” she says, “is that everywhere I go, young people filled with energy want to show me what they have done and what they are doing to make the world a better place. Once they understand the problems and when we empower them to take action, they almost always want to help. And their energy and enthusiasm and creativity are endless.”

Finally, she refers to the indomitable human spirit. She sees this as the result of an energy force connected to a great spiritual power - which she feels especially when she is close to nature. When asked to define that indomitable spirit she replies, “it’s that quality in us that makes us tackle what seems impossible and never give up. Despite the odds, despite the scorn or mocking of others, despite possible failure. The grit and determination to overcome personal problems, physical disability, abuse, discrimination. The inner strength and courage to pursue a

goal at any cost to self in a fight for justice and freedom. Even when it means paying the ultimate price of giving up one's life."

The human intellect, the resilience of nature, the energy of the young, and the indomitable human spirit - in all of this Goodall sees hope for humanity and the planet as a whole.

I agree with her that these are all good reasons to hold unto hope even in the darkest of times. And I would add unto it the ability to look upon the past and bring its lessons into our present. Yes, we are living in difficult times, but it is certainly not the first time this country and the world have weathered storms - some even worse than today. For example, our Civil War, the Great Depression, and World Wars I and II. There exists a certain national resilience as well. And, no doubt, we, as individuals, have weathered a storm or two in our lives, and have lived to tell the tale.

Of course, within the church we have some additional ways to look forward in hope. A part of that has to do with divine promises. One example of such a promise is found in this morning's reading in Jeremiah. "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise, I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he will execute justice and righteousness." We have come to see that "righteous Branch" to be Jesus, born of the house of David.

In and through Jesus, we come to recognize other promises, that of eternal life, and the coming kingdom of God. Eternal life as I have pointed out before is not just associated with that which takes place beyond our demise, but that which we can experience in the here and now through the power of faith. It is the same with the coming kingdom, which I also see as present to us in the here and now, when we are obedient in following the qualities that Jesus identified as part of the kingdom, i.e., compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice, peace, and love. In those things the kingdom is present in part, and in faith we hope for its ultimate fulfillment.

John Calvin saw faith and hope as inseparable companions, saying that, "hope is nothing more than the expectation of those things faith previously believes to have been truly promised by God". He goes on to say that "faith believes that God is true; hope expects that in due season he will manifest his truth. Faith believes that he is our Father; hope expects he will always act the part of a Father towards us. Faith believes that eternal life has been given to us; hope expects that it will one day be revealed. Faith is the foundation on which hope rests; hope nourishes and sustains faith."

And, so, on this first Sunday of Advent, we anticipate our celebration of the birth of the one whose life, death, and resurrection reveals to us the source of hope. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth, on this first Advent Sunday we look to you and know that even in the darkest of times there is always hope. We beseech you to help us find the faith and strength we need to face adversity and the willingness to do what we can to help create a better world. Help us to embody the qualities and virtues we find in your Son Jesus who revealed to all the possibility of your kingdom on Earth. Teach us how best to bear witness to your love as we strive to live lives of compassion and mercy, and we thank you for Jane Goodall and others who lead and inspire us in ways that lead to the wellbeing of the world and all that dwells upon it. Amen.