

Because We Believe

Recounting, counting down, counting on, Advent is about counting. During Advent we recount, retell, the story of the birth of the Christ Child. We sing and shout Emmanuel, God with us. During Advent we count down the Sundays, perhaps even the days, until Christmas arrives. Four Sundays, four candles, four weeks, give or take a few days. During Advent we count on – we count on the promise that just as God came, in unexpected and life changing ways on that night so long ago, so God will continue to come, to be with us, until all of creation finds its place in God's will and way, until peace and good will are reality because it is the desire of every heart. Advent calls us to turn our hearts to God and to the distant future.

There is a wonderful cast of characters that lead us through this counting season. The characters from the Biblical story, each with their unique perspectives and personalities, remind us that all have a place in God's kingdom. Other characters, ancient and modern remind us that though much changes God's ultimate gifts, love, compassion, generosity, laughter and miracles beyond humanity's ability to understand remain constant.

On this first Sunday of Advent we focus on the prophets. In biblical times prophets appeared when times were rough. Prophets proclaimed "thus saith the Lord" went the noise of human needs, desires and concerns clamored loudly. Prophets were and are unusual, odd folk, folk that looked past themselves and past their moment in time. Prophets knew the power of words, in naming reality and in calling others to consider how they were interpreting the words of others, and the word of God.

There are Profitts in my family. Spelled differently from the biblical ones – Proffitt. My sister Angie's married name is Profitt, with our shared maiden name of Pope, she is well aware of the image that some words conjure up. Angie and Randy have been blessed with two children, their spouses, two grandchildren, and their dog, Wrinkles. We are blessed in that as a family we were able to join together with all living members of four generations on Thanksgiving Day. Like many families along with first names, the names of mom, grandma, sis, can and are often applied to several of us. As the day worn on, 5 year old Timothy, Angie's grandson, found his own way of identifying which grandma he was looking for. Coming into the kitchen he loudly asked where is grandma with wrinkles?

To anyone else such an identifier might be insulting, but to Angie, and in our family, it is simply an indication of how great a part of the extended family Angie's dog is. Grandma with wrinkles carried a meaning that is far different that the casual hearer might imagine.

Meanings far different than imagined by the casual hearer was also the hallmark of the Biblical prophets. Though they named the messy realities, and did not expect that God would quickly come and rescue them, they also proclaimed hope. Hope is one of those words which have a far greater meaning that a casual hearing might evoke. I've asked many to name the difference between a wish and a hope. Though the responses varied, all named that the difference was immense. Wishes are temporary things, often self-centered, and as one stated "what we want without working for."

Hope is future orientated and eternal in scope. We hope not for ourselves but for what will be for those who come after. The words of Reinhold Niebuhr, "nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore we are saved by hope" captures the power of hope. We wish in specifics, we hope in scopes that are beyond our imagination. Hope is a yearning for God, a yearning that is greater even than our wishing that we could direct or harness the power of God for our own purposes.

We count our way through Advent because we count on hope. We count on the prophets, those who do not act in ways that may be considered socially acceptable, or speak the words that bring temporary comfort. We count of the prophets who will call us to accept responsibility and to return to the ways of God. We count on the hope that there will be those who help us sort through all the stuff and reclaim the source of true joy and peace.

The Christmas story tells so that the prophets' hopes did and can come to pass. The Christmas story tells us that hope implies a certain amount of despair, wanting, wishing, suffering or perseverance. Prophets call us to be about believing that a better or positive outcome is possible even when there is evidence to the contrary. Prophets speak of what is to be in lifetimes past our own, yet profoundly effected and shaped our faith. Prophets remind us that faithfulness feels more like, to quote the songwriter "tugging on superman's cape or spitting into the wind", than it is about having or doing anything that is considered powerful in the here and now.

We find hope each year in the story, and in the counting, a hope that was not just something once proved to be true, but a hope which breathes life into our faith and Christ into our hearts. We stand with the prophets in the midst of messy and confusing times. We join the prophets in naming that there is not an easy fix and that comfort is not what God promises those who center their lives in Christ. Yet we hope, we share a concrete and life changing hope that what God wills will become reality. We stand on a hope that allows for God to work, in and through us, for the time that is yet to come.

Each year, yet perhaps more so this year, recounting the story is not enough. Each year, yet perhaps more so this year, counting the days and focusing in on one day of gaiety and gifting is not enough. Each year, yet perhaps more so this year, counting on God, God who is as interested and involved in the here and now and in the future as the past, is the hope we all need. We look forand experience this hope in four areas:

- Promise - Life From Death/Hope From Judgment
- Presence - Emmanuel: God With Us
- Peace - Justice/Security/Safety
- People - Imago Dei restored/Unity

My sister, Angie, is happy to be "grandma with wrinkles" knowing the love that name implies regardless of how it's heard by those around her. May we happy to been seen as those who hope in something beyond themselves, who hope is not in vain, regardless of how unlikely that hope seems in the midst of the here and now.