

ADVENT 1 – HOPE OR LONGING?

(12/03/17)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 42
 Romans 5:1-5
 Luke 2:25-32

*“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:1-2)*

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent, the four weeks preceding Christmas, is a time of preparation. We prepare not only for the celebration of the birth of the Christ child but also for the birth, the incarnation of the Christ child in our lives and in our world today.

This morning, we lit the first of our Advent candles—the candle of hope. Each candle symbolizes a spiritual gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us by the grace of God. All we need to do is unwrap the gift. As we do this, we become conscious of that feeling, of that experience as a preparation for Christmas and for the living of our daily lives.

A few weeks ago in our Tuesday study group where we are reading *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a spiritual text written by an unknown Christian mystic who lived in England in the 14th century, we were struck by how often the author uses the word “longing.” For example, he says that we are connected to God by what he calls “a leash of longing.” I love that phrase: “a leash of longing.” It implies that we are always connected to God and that the root of this bond is the longing that God has placed within our heart.

In what I feel is the heart of this text, the author speaks to our attempt to know God when he says, “God may be well loved, but he may not be thought of. He may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought never.” With regard to “the thick cloud of unknowing” that separates us from God, the author says, “You are to strike that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.” “A sharp dart of longing love.”

Though hope is closely related to longing, they are not the same. Webster defines hope as “the feeling that what is desired is also possible, or that events may turn out for the best.” Longing is defined as “prolonged, unceasing, or earnest desire.” To long is to yearn, as in “to long for spring,” or “to long to return home.”

In light of these definitions, hope seems to be more passive than longing. Hope is an expression of desire coupled with the belief that what we desire may become a reality. We hope we will be happy and healthy in the year to come. We hope that the problems in the Middle East

will be resolved. We hope that Africa will avoid the devastating famine that looms on the horizon. We hope that Haiti will be able to rebuild from the earthquakes, hurricanes, cholera, poverty, and political unrest that crush its people's spirit. We hope that we will find it in our hearts to respond in a compassionate way to those refugees from Haiti and other countries that have found a new life with and among us.

Longing seems both active and intense. When we long for something, we ache for it. We lean toward the object of our desire. We usually long for something we have already experienced, like spring at the end of a long winter or returning home at the end of a long trip. We long for health when we are sick; we have experienced health and we can't wait to get back to it. This is different from hoping for health or hoping that we will be healthy before too long.

I wonder if longing is more closely tied to Advent and to our spiritual journey than hope. Maybe it is not just that we hope Christ will be born again in the world and in our lives; we actually long for this. We do not wait passively, because longing is more than expectation. Longing is a state of "prolonged, unceasing, or earnest desire." Prolonged, unceasing, and earnest--this is certainly not passive. It should move us to action.

At the end of my second trip to Nepal and Tibet, I longed to be back home. Because of a paralyzed diaphragm and collapsed lung I was not breathing well. Nepal was in chaos following the assassination of the royal family. I cut my trip short by a week, forgoing an expedition into the wilderness of northwestern Nepal to get back home. Because I requested a change in flights, I was placed on standby.

I didn't have any problem getting from Kathmandu to Delhi and from Delhi to London, but I couldn't get a seat on the plane from London to Boston. I remember standing by the ticket counter at Heathrow airport for six straight hours, just standing still and waiting while a very understanding and compassionate ticket agent did everything she could to get me on that plane. At least I was honest. I didn't claim it was a medical or family emergency. As I told her, "I just really want to get back home."

I didn't just *hope* I would get on that plane. I *longed* to be back home--in my house, in my bed, with my wife there to take care of me (even though she is not adverse to making critical and judgmental statements about how I got sick in the first place). I *ached*; I actually ached to be back home. The ticket agent, whose name was Mrs. Nightingale, was both competent and

compassionate. She not only got me on the plane; she arranged for me to fly home first class. There is a special spot in heaven, at least in my version of heaven, for Mrs. Nightingale.

What have you longed for? Have you ever been away on a trip and longed to be back home? Have you ever been so sick you not only hoped you would get better but actually longed for health? Have you been separated from loved ones because of distance and longed to be with them? Have you been separated from loved ones by death and find yourself longing for their presence, especially during the holidays?

Can you see how longing is different from hope? I hoped I would be able to get on a flight from London to Boston without having to change my money to British pounds, leave the airport, take a taxi to some hotel, and extend my trip by another day. I longed to be back home in the same way I sometimes long to be back in Tibet.

Picture your own case of longing, your own example. Feel the ache, the persistent, enduring desire, the yearning. Now, as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests, think what it would mean to have this same sort of feeling, the same sort of longing toward God.

In Psalm 42 both hope and longing are included in the psalmist's articulation of his and his people's inner distress.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

As a deer that is thirsty longs for the clear water of a flowing stream, so also our souls long for God, for the stream of living water that wells up within us to eternal life. Think what it would mean to be dying of thirst. We would not hope for water; we would *long* for water. The psalmist is saying that this is the degree of intensity we should bring to our quest for God.

We can only long for something we have already experienced. The deer has experienced the water that quenches its thirst. It believes the water is there. This is where hope comes in. The psalmist, whose soul is "disquieted within him," longs to feel connected once again with God. He believes this can once again become a reality, that through God's presence he will rise above the troubles that plague him. So he hopes in God. This hope enables him to believe in a better future, one where he will feel praise instead of despair rising up within him.

Think about what it would mean, what it would feel like to long for God's presence, to yearn for God's presence, to ache for God's presence. In Psalm 84, the psalmist says,

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

*My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.*

My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord. It *faints!* Can you see how this is a lot stronger than hope?

We can't create a condition of longing within us when it isn't there. Fortunately, we don't have to. The longing is already there. All we have to do is discover it. Then it will become the central dynamic in our lives. As St. Augustine has said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." When we are not with God, our heart is restless. Our soul longs for the courts of the Lord. It longs for the living water. When we find it, our soul is at peace.

Simeon longed to see the Messiah before he died. When his longing was finally fulfilled, he was able to be at peace. The lesson Simeon would teach us is that the Messiah for whom we long has already come in the person of Jesus and is already within us as the Holy Spirit.

The first Advent candle reminds us that our quest to find, to experience God in our lives should be motivated by more than hope. It should be the expression of a deep longing, a yearning, a persistent and enduring desire to be with God. This is a longing to experience something that we have already experienced. We know we have experienced it because it has been placed within our souls, within the very depth of our being. It is present with us and within us as the Holy Spirit.

The Gnostics used the analogy of a flame to describe our relationship with God. They described God as the eternal flame, the eternal light. They believed that each of us carries within the depths of our soul a little piece of this flame. The purpose of life is for us to realize that this spark of light within us is one with the great eternal flame of God. Then we need to reunite our little flame with the eternal flame of God. When we do this, we will have returned home and we will experience eternal life. If we do not do this before we die, our little flame goes out.

In this Advent season, let us open our hearts to that longing, that yearning, that deep desire for the Christ child who is at the center of our faith. Then, like Simeon, let us awaken to the realization that the Christ child is already here.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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December 3, 2017*