

-This last week, I went into Missoula Fresh Market by my house to pick up a couple groceries. When I stepped inside, I caught the final part of the famous Bob Marley song "Don't worry be happy." That was followed by this weird smooth jazz version of "We wish you a Merry Christmas." I found it a very surreal experience because at the same time I passed this kid racing his shopping cart all over the store, several babies crying, a person yelling at a cashier about how the store didn't have what they wanted, and someone else clearly in an argument and yelling into their cell phone along the refrigerator aisle. It was this fountain of chaos loosely covered over by this gentle, "don't worry" music that made me want to leave as quickly as possible.

-In a lot of ways I think, our Advent/Christmas season feels a lot like this Missoula Fresh Market experience. Just a few days ago, the Missoulian newspaper ran a short article about "what you need to do during Christmas". It literally had events and days planned out (on this day you gotta plan your meals, on this day you gotta set up decorations, on this day you gotta get out and shop, etc. etc.) I don't know about you, but I feel this crazy level of anxiety right now in everything I "have to do and buy" for Christmas accompanied by these fake "reassurances" of "don't worry, it's Christmas time, be happy." I'm kind of sick of it already. So why does this happen? Why do we plow ourselves into this scene?

-In a lot of ways, ironically, I think we do it because we need a distraction. A recent poll by AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that 54% of Americans have a negative outlook on future life. Only 23% of Americans believe their lives will get better in the future. Political turmoil and nationalist/fascist tendencies have swept the world. Our own political divide in the US continues to grow along with economic disparity and well-being. The opioid crisis continues to run rampant in our culture which has led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to report that average age life-expectancy has decreased in this country (first time this has happened since World War I). Then, if you pay any attention or work within the realm of Climate Change, your stress level won't be helped much at all. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we have less than 10 years to get our world off of using fossil fuels in order to prevent catastrophic warming. This, all the while environmental regulations in multiple countries have been reversed and fossil fuel extraction and extinction of a countless number of animal species is at an all-time high. Many of us are at a loss for hope. So what do we do? Well, "don't worry be happy", let's throw ourselves into the "Christmas cheer", let's plan our meals, buy our trendy electronic gifts at Black Friday sales, and consume countless number of Christmas treats we don't need. Anything to forget how our world seems to be falling apart.

-The prophet Jeremiah knew a thing or two about "falling apart" and despair. Here was a person who railed again and again against the utter corruption and abuse done by the rule and people of ancient Israel. Here was a person who was jailed for his "speaking

out against the king” and while he was in jail lived through an invasion by the Babylonian Empire that completely wiped out the ancient King of Israel, the city of Jerusalem, and the Jewish Temple. Imagine Jeremiah surveying from his bombed-out jail cell the burning ruins of Jerusalem, the bodies being pulled out of the rubble, the people starving for food, and him saying: “The days are surely 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 shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Welcome to the context of the book of Jeremiah.

- As I mentioned before, the first candle on our Advent wreath that we light today is traditionally known as the “hope” candle. Hope. What does it mean to have hope in times of despair? What does hope look like in times of great hopelessness?

-in October, Abby and I attended a conference on Faith, Science, and Climate Change in Bozeman. One of the keynote speakers was Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, a devout evangelical Christian (who is married, actually, to an evangelical pastor) and a well respected Climate scientist. She had a lot of amazing things to say and I strongly recommend any of you to check some of her youtube videos and lectures out. One of the most powerful moments for me during her presentation was when someone asked: “how do you have hope that the world will respond to Climate Change when so many things are going wrong right now?” Her answer revolved around the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah. She said: you know, you had these prophets and groups of people in the bible who probably had about zero hope for the future themselves. Yet when they gathered together through prayer or ritual, you had a deep and powerful hope that was spoken through and to each of them. Maybe most of them didn’t believe it at first, but the more they spoke and witnessed it to each other, the more they internalized it. The more that this happened, the greater and more powerful their hope became until it actually turned into the reality the entire world was living. It was hope that became embodied. “That’s what keeps me going,” she said. “I am waiting for our hope to become our reality.” Dr. Hayhoe’s eloquent definition of hope has stuck with me. It is, I believe, the embodied hope of Advent.

-Maybe this is the message that Jesus, in the book of Luke, is also describing when he says: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down...” The embodied hope that we share together is this gift of God’s son to the world. Yet, our calling today is to not only help the world, but also help ourselves live this gift out.

-This Advent, I have in my head multiple times already the quote that is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” I know I fiddled with this quote in my newsletter article (which you can all read later), but I want to change this quote again for this morning to say: “Be the *hope* that you want to see in the world.”

Maybe this sounds trite or too simplistic. Maybe this sounds impossible even ourselves, but I think that's our journey here together this Advent.

-Our calling is to help one another keep watch, not despairingly keep our heads in the sand with Christmas distractions. Our calling is to help each other embody Christ's deep hope for our future so that one day it may become the world's reality too.

-It won't be easy and none of us can do this on our own. But here is the thing that we can take comfort in this season of Advent: it's been done before. Jeremiah and his community broke through despair and found this hope. Jesus and his disciples broke through despair and found this hope. The early church communities of John, Mark, Luke, and Matthew broke through despair and found this hope. Now it's our turn.

-For Christ is with us, come what may. May we be able to embody that reality for each other and for a chaotic and despair filled world. Welcome to Advent. Amen.