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[Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 3:1-12](#)
LMC: December 4, 2016

Here are some verses from Isaiah that are in the [lectionary](#), that is, the assigned readings throughout Advent:¹

“In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (2:2-3)

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.” (9:2)

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” (35:1-2)

“[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (2:4)

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” (7:14-15)

Here are some verses from Isaiah that are not in the assigned Scripture readings for Advent:

“Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance” (Isaiah 46:12)

“Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low.” (10:33)

“And so people are humbled, and everyone is brought low—do not forgive them! Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord” (2:9-10)

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”² (53:5-6)

“Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! Therefore all hands will be feeble and every human heart will melt and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.” (13:6-8)

¹ The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Scripture readings designed to maximize the depth and continuity of Scripture used in church. It's widely used throughout Protestant denominations.

² This is also known as “the suffering servant” passage, which Christians interpret as foretelling Jesus' suffering on behalf of sinful Israel and humanity generally.

The lectionary is a great tool for reading across the Bible week-to-week. But it has its weaknesses, too, and it tends to avoid the uncomfortable passages of the Bible—for the sake of the congregation or the preacher, I don't know.

This Advent, many of you have shared how eagerly you await signs of hope and comfort. After the stress of the election and the beating 2016 has given us, many of you ask if we can really magnify the Advent hope this season since the rest of the world seems so dark.

When I hear this, I wonder if you are really asking for comfort or if you are asking for stability. If you are asking to hear peace; peace when there is no peace.³ At my most cynical, I ask if by hope you—and other Christians, I have heard it both inside and outside this congregation—mean *opiate of the masses*.⁴ Yes, the president-elect is a compulsive liar and was elected on a platform of hate. Yes, Muslims and gay people have been the victims of more hate crimes in the last month; the Affordable Care Act may remove healthcare for millions and workers' rights and benefits could be chopped and the environment massacred and deportations may be ramped up but can't the church just be a place of hope?

If by hope you mean *tone deaf to pain*, I will not preach hope this Advent.

Look. The peaceable kingdom is a gorgeous image, the wolf lying with the lamb and the goat and the leopard and the child leading them. But it's also a troubling one. As I reflected on the text, I realized I could not avoid telling you all a troubling truth: by all accounts, you will *have to be vegetarian* in the kingdom of God. If the *bear* is not allowed to eat the cow, if the *lion* is eating straw—best believe there will be no hamburgers in heaven. And if one person comes up to me after this sermon and says "I better eat all the bacon now," I'm going to have to ask you if you are really interested in the Christian life. And I know that hurts. I've tried to organize vegetarian meals at this congregation.

And *this* is the key distinction about Advent hope: Jesus did not come to offer hope that you can eat bacon regardless of your cholesterol; Jesus came to offer hope that vegetarian food is not that bad.

Isaiah 11 is not as tame or comfortable as we've made it out to be in the Christian church. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse—and "he will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears, but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth."

This is a very polite way of saying *wealth redistribution*. In the Hebrew text, this word righteousness, *tzedeqah*, has a deeply nuanced meaning.⁵ One Rabbi calls it "distributive justice," in opposition to the word *mishpat*, which is retributive justice, or justice to correct individual action.⁶ *Tzedeqah* and *mishpat* go hand-in-hand. It is blind justice accompanied by justice who is peaking, correcting the failings of blind justice. It is social justice.

³ See [Ezekiel 13](#).

⁴ That Christianity often functions as an opiate is evident, I think, from its failure to introduce any substantive dialogue in the 2016 election. An opiate has no capacity to actually influence the critical thought of the user. Anabaptism was itself a response to the feeling that Catholicism had become too much opiate and not enough spiritual growth. Christianity ought to embrace [Karl Marx's metaphor](#) as it examines its role in contemporary culture and society.

⁵ For more information on the etymology of *tzedeqah*, see [this](#).

⁶ For more on how *tzedeqah* and *mishpat* interact, see [this](#).

The shoot of Jesse doesn't judge by what he sees—he doesn't separate out the “deserving poor” from the “undeserving poor.” He across the board develops a sense of justice that has a distinct bias for the poor.

Make no mistake, Isaiah is the prophet who said, in chapter 1:

Hear the word of the LORD,
You rulers of Sodom;
Give ear to the instruction of our God,
You people of Gomorrah.

- 11 “What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?”
Says the LORD.
“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.
- 12 “When you come to appear before Me,
Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?
- 13 “Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
Incense is an abomination to Me.
New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.
- 14 “I hate your new moon *festivals* and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing *them*.
- 15 “So when you spread out your hands *in prayer*,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.
- 16 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Cease to do evil,
- 17 Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow.

Everything in Isaiah (and the prophets generally) prioritizes the disenfranchised. Everything is correcting social injustice; we say this in the subversive [Magnificat](#): “to the hungry he gives food, turns the rich away empty.” “He uplifts the lowly and scatters the proud-hearted.”

This is, on the one hand, hopeful. But it also means we will be asked to give deeply. And not just asked to give, compelled to give. Our lives will be shaken to the core.

One pastor I spoke with this week put it this way: *“God could have just destroyed the wolf and the lion and the snake. But God chose to reintegrate them with the vulnerable creatures.”*

How many of you would love to see your child playing with a snake? Not just any snake—the NRSV really does a disservice here, that’s why we heard the NIV translation today—but a highly venomous snake like the Egyptian cobra. How many of you would love to come home and see your child playing with a cobra?

What Isaiah is saying is that *we are the cobra*. Contemporary Christianity likes to think that prophecy means fortune telling. But Old Testament prophecy is much more a radical critique of the social order, with occasional visions of how certain social policies will impact the future. Prophecy much more often means to speak of unpopular things.

Isaiah prophesied in Judah under the reign of several kings. He grew up watching the current superpower, the Assyrian Empire, conquer all the states surrounding Judah. He counseled King Ahaz about how to respond to Assyrian aggression, and in all cases, Isaiah counseled a domestic social policy that preserved the rights and livelihood of the poor. Isaiah’s hope centered on a political policy of responding to the disenfranchised. And, as the book goes on and the kings cut social services and minimize the poor, Isaiah’s laments become more profound. He sees the destruction of the kingdom, the disintegration of the whole social fabric. Paradoxically, Isaiah argues, no international power can destroy the country if their domestic policy is sound. With a claim like that, surely, Isaiah would be a recipient of Donald Trump’s hateful and impulsive tweets.

What happens after Jesus’ birth? Joseph and his recovering wife Mary wake in the night and flee to Egypt, leaving their house and property in Nazareth and slipping for several years from the working poor into deep poverty. They become refugees.

The first thing the Savior of the World does is threaten his parents so severely that they leave in the night without a word to their relatives. That’s the hope Jesus brings.

I like the song “Comfort, Comfort.” It’s my favorite Advent hymn. But do you know what it says in Isaiah 40, where the text is taken from? It says:

“Comfort, comfort, my people...
A voice says ‘Cry out.’
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’
All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall
because the breath of the LORD blows on them....
[That’s why Comfort Comfort doesn’t have a fourth verse.
It goes on:]
Before God all the nations are as nothing;

they are regarded by him as worthless...
God brings princes to aught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing...
Why do you say O Jacob
and complain, O Israel...?"

The hope is mixed with a radical social reordering. God speaks comfort because change—radical change, perhaps even punishment and pain—are coming. The hope Jesus brings is inextricable from the struggle for justice.

If you are looking for comfort this Advent, I'm sure you can find a room at the inn. But if you are looking for Jesus, you'll have to get out of that fancy hotel room and walk to the parking lot and have a metaphorical cigarette with the homeless family in the ally. That's where Jesus is.

The hope that Jesus brings is less comfort than resilience. Less complacency than persistence. The hope Jesus brings is tenacity and love and grit. It is, in Spanish the word is *luchar*. To struggle and overcome. That kind of hope.

Hope is the activists standing at [Standing Rock](#) through the winter and the water cannons.⁷

Hope is itinerant poverty in a tent community in Nazareth.

Hope is that we, Christians and kingdom builders, have more imagination and art and song and resilience than King Herod who clings to the status quo.

Hope is that our emotional intelligence far outstrips that of the politicians who legislate us.

Hope is in downsizing.

After the election, I reread two formative pieces of literature: the book of Revelation and The Hunger Games trilogy.⁸ Revelation is about stewarding hope in the midst of political aggression and ramped up political persecution, and it's full of song and coded, metaphorical encouragement. The Hunger Games is about stewarding hope in the midst of political aggression and ramped up political persecution, and it's full of song and coded, metaphorical encouragement—how long does it take Katniss to figure out what the mockingjay symbolizes, hm? And we are still trying to figure out what that dragon means in Revelation.

But the hope found in both Revelation and The Hunger Games is not a “wait for it” hope. It is a hope that moves one to action *for rewards that will be reaped by their children*. The Hunger Games is full of an eschatological hope, a hope rooted in creating a better life not for those who survive the brutal battle with the empire, but hope for the children's children's children. Hope that eventually, Katniss' descendants will recover from the generational trauma of oppression without revisiting it on

⁷ This sermon was preached before Sunday's announcement that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had denied the permit. Most organizers and water-protectors view this as a qualified victory, much like the Sept. 9 decision that caused only a small delay in construction. For a full timeline of events at Standing Rock, see [here](#).

⁸ Alongside the book of Revelation, I read Barbara Rossing's [The Rapture Exposed](#), which traces the development of biblically-tenuous rapture theology and explores alternate interpretations to Revelation that do not rely on Tim LeHaye's best-selling series.

another people. Katniss' constant hope is that her death will preserve vibrant life for Peeta and Prim and even Madge.⁹ Her hope is perpetual prioritization of her loved ones even at the cost of her own life. And that begins to sound like Jesus.

There's nothing glossy in our Advent hope. It is gritty. Hope is remaining committed to lament, for the next four years, every time Donald Trump gets on Twitter or, even more, proposes absurd and unconstitutional legislation. Hope is repeated calls to elected officials even when we know they will not listen.¹⁰ Hope is faithful, nonviolent rebellion.

Hope is participation in a community of resistance. Hope is depth of our resistance. This week, I wrote an article for Mennonite World Review about what it means to resist.

I wrote about airport security. Full-body scanners and their role in preserving a militarized system based on fear of the Other. Body scanners are a metaphor for our most base fear. Only by submitting to this walled room—overseen by uniformed officers—can we find security. And it occurred to me that my longstanding habit of requesting a pat-down was a form of nonviolent resistance. The act of presenting your body, of asking someone to look and see your body closely, as a material and not a photo, is a nonviolent resistance. It transforms state-authorized systems of violence. It collapses the space between traveler and officer. It responds to fearfulness with fearlessness, to say paradoxically that *my body is not a tool for violence and you may touch these scars to see it for yourself*.

For years, I've always requested a pat-down because it seemed, I don't know, important. Only recently did I connect that sense with the idea of Anabaptist resistance. Choosing pat-downs means choosing to trust a stranger, confronting an inflexible system with the creativity and vulnerability of your created-in-God's-image body.

Once, a TSA agent tapped my pockets where my hipbones jutted out and said, "What are these?"

"Those are my bones," I told her, embarrassed and at the same time confident in my body's idiosyncrasies.

The last time I flew, I accidentally wore a dress to my pat-down, with sheer stockings so transparent the outline of my tattoo was visible. The woman giving my pat-down was in training, supervised by a male officer. When she reached my legs, she stepped back, contemplating. "Do I have to pat down her stockings?" she asked.

As the officer shook his head, all three of us giggled. We laughed at the system's absurdity, at the intimacy of this moment contrived by violence, at the idea that any one of us was a threat to any other one of us. And I glimpsed, from the corner of my eye, Jesus laughing with us, as the system of violence became a meeting of three individuals.

⁹ Part of Katniss' character development is her idealistic hope in not a utopian world, but a better world. While Suzanne Collins maintains that Peeta and Katniss will always live a life processing their post-traumatic stress, she offers some hope that their parenting skills will limit the generational trauma of their children.

¹⁰ This seems to be the task of the prophets; to over and over, record a voice that no one will listen to. Perhaps the role of the prophets is to document voices of resistance for posterity, so the Empire (winners) will not control the narrative of history.

Hope is imagining Christians across the country refusing body scans and opting to interact with TSA agencies as they go through their holiday travel. That thousands of us, by slowing down a system of violence, can transform our sense of security through personal interactions.

John the Baptist is hardly a reassuring figure to the Pharisees struggling to be faithful to both God and the status quo. Instead, hope is in his resistance, his refusal to baptize those who consider baptism some first-century Ice Bucket Challenge to amuse and distract. The hope of John the Baptist is his commitment to honey and locusts, which is the metaphorical equivalent of a vegetarian permaculture diet, resisting the Roman practice of monoculture for a diversified, low-environmental-impact diet.

Hope is complicated. In the words of Finley Peter Dunne, a Chicago writer and humorist, the hope we have is one that “comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.”

If you’re feeling a little afflicted right now, all I can say is: I think that’s the sound of your faith growing. Embrace the feeling. We’ve all been comfortable for far too long.