

Sermon for Advent 3<sup>1</sup>  
**Sounds too Good to be true – what's the catch? or Holy Hope**  
Isaiah 35 and Matthew 11

While preparing this sermon

I asked myself, do I start at the end or the beginning of it.  
really a false problem, as one can only really begin at the beginning, but  
I would like to give you a glimpse of where this one is heading.  
The amazing vision of Isaiah 35, is where we are heading.  
It is a vision of a blossoming wilderness,  
It is a place that was once dry, rocky, virtually impassable and haunted  
with jackals, lions and other predators.  
But now it is abundant with crocuses  
filled with the glory of Lebanon, a former Lebanon if we compare this  
passage to the Lebanon of today.  
a place where weak hands become strong,  
feeble knees are made steady  
those who fear are given hearts of courage  
the eyes of the blind are opened  
the ears of the deaf unstopped.

In this transformed place  
the lame leap like deer,  
the tongues of the speechless, those without voice, sing for joy  
and water, the most essential part of a new vision for an arid wasteland  
breaks forth and streams through the desert.

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The burning sands becomes a pool of water

And then

a safe and smooth highway for the redeemed, those whom God has reclaimed for God's self – makes this terrain not only beautiful beyond imagining but also passable.

It's glorious. Truly.

But we must return now to a different beginning.

the one offered to us by

Matthew's gospel.

The story in Matthew gives us the context

within which the profound hope of Isaiah's vision matters.

The context for this hope is rather bleak.

In Matthew 11, John the Baptist is in prison,

having been arrested by Herod

and later executed by him.

From behind bars and this place of hopelessness

he sends his disciples to see if Jesus really is the one for whom he has

been waiting.

Jesus responds

with echoes of Isaiah's vision.

Go and tell John what you hear and see;

the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Remember John is behind bars. His situation must feel utterly hopeless.

And from that place

he wants to know

if his life and work found their fruit in this Jesus.

Is he the one?

Is there hope?

Is there hope?

Christmas. It is a difficult season. Christmas.

On the one hand, it's a season of glorious music and celebrations that

sing hope and joy and peace and childlike wonder

where we dare to hope that the tiny God with us child will turn the

world upside down and the vision of Isaiah will be really real.

but there are still so many prison bars to contend with.

Our prison bars have names

starting with the icy steel of winter and increasing darkness, which

exacerbates for some depression or other mental health challenges.

Then there are the bars of

chronic pain,

being a caregiver for someone with dementia,

living with dementia,

ill health,

grief, and grief for many losses tends to all glom together at this time of

year

and then there are the bars of fear, despair and hopelessness.

And those are just the personal prison bars.

I haven't even begun to name the systemic ones, violence - domestic and international, poverty, inequality, oppression, exploitation, - just yesterday - a suicide bomber in Yemen, ISIS advances, the war in Syria continues, more refugees are created as people caught in violence seek shelter and a new life.

It seems

In the bleak mid-winter, if we are honest, the prison bars with these names seem closer together, stronger, and less moveable.

And we express our longing for something better in hymns like we just sang

Healer of our every ill

Light of each tomorrow,

give us peace beyond our fear,

and hope beyond our sorrow.

And then we read Isaiah.

Isaiah 35, 29, 25, 42, 61 - where the blind see, the deaf hear, good news is preached to the poor....

and the wilderness springs forth with newness.

And if like John from prison with not much hope for our own personal circumstances, when we can't see that anything will change and things may even be getting worse  
we may like John – send out scouts. Are you the one, Jesus for whom we wait?

As I pondered John's predicament, I imagined him thinking about those Isaiah visions, the ones he confidently proclaimed were coming and I wondered if skepticism may have entered his prison cell. I wondered if skepticism may even have become one of the prison bars strong and sturdy.

I remember a saying of my father's  
If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is and it's always important to ask – what's the catch?  
It is a wise saying as it helps develop what I would call a healthy skepticism.

A healthy skepticism helps us to look beyond the promises of ads that say, stay at home, work two hours a day and earn 500.00 per week. Healthy skepticism helps us assess the nature of the promise. What does the promise appeal to? Is it personal gain and happiness in the form of things that don't actually bring or buy happiness? What will it really cost me - this easy 500.00? Who gains and who loses? And what do I lose in the process? Healthy skepticism helps us sort these things out.

But if skepticism creeps in and takes up residence in us,

it can block hope even and especially when we deeply need to hope in something.

This Isaiah vision is radical.

It paints a world that does not exist in this form.

and as such it may sound too good to be true.

Jesus, are you the One for whom we are waiting, 2000 years ago, now,  
and each year at bleak mid-winter when the iron prison bars feel close  
and cold and strong.

What is our hope?

And Jesus says,

What do you hear and see, (who gains and who loses?)

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the  
deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to  
them.

This is about divine hope. This is not human optimism or hollow  
promises that speak only of personal gain, or promise that material  
possessions and money will bring or buy happiness.

Jesus offers in his person and in his deeds a hope for a truly free and  
transformed world and there is no catch – because Jesus himself was  
willing to bear the cost.

If John can receive this hope it just might squeeze through the prison bars and assure him that his prophetic voice was not in vain.

Jesus goes on to say that John who proclaimed this vision in the desert was truly a prophet in the tradition of Elijah and of all those born of women no one has arisen who is greater than he, and yet there is more, the least in the kingdom of heaven, the new world that Jesus inaugurates will be greater still. In other words, the best is yet to come. John the Baptist needed to hear that there would be more than his prison bars for hope to enter his cell.

Jesus in his words and deeds began to provide the foretaste of a new world that exists within and next to the old, because as we know the old world has not disappeared. We still live with it and it still presses in on us and tries to keep us captive.

But there is hope, divine hope, a Holy hope

The hope of Isaiah's vision made real in Jesus can not only squeeze through the prison bars, it can also dissolve them and even break them open.

A favourite movie of the 1990's reminds me of the power of hope. Shawshank Redemption.

The main character Andy has been unjustly convicted of murder – sentenced to life in prison. In prison the inmates treat him unjustly

and the prison guards treat him unjustly even after he has been helping them.

Throughout the movie one has no idea how he seems to be able to hold up to one injustice after another.

At one point after two weeks in solitary confinement he tells the other inmates that it was hope that sustained him but throughout the movie we have no idea why he remains hopeful.

Spoiler alert:

We have no idea how he remained hopeful until the end when he escapes.

It is then that the source of his hope is revealed. Day after day, month after month and year after year with a tiny stone carving tool he had been chiseling a hole in the wall of his cell. He kept the hole hidden by a poster and carted the crumbs of stone out into the prison yard in tiny amounts each day.

The hole that he created led to a main sewer line. When it was finally time to escape, under the cover of darkness and the noise of rain and a thunderstorm, he crawled through the hole and 500 feet of raw sewage to a stream outside the prison and he was free.

Hope and a tiny carving tool kept him going through all those years and injustices.

Hope cannot be held prisoner.



It can squeeze through bars, dissolve them and eventually break them open.

Each year we celebrate the coming of Jesus,  
Each week we rehearse and remember parts of Jesus story.  
Each day we pray for the world we want to live in  
And all of these tiny pieces of participation in the hope of the divine promises cannot be contained.

Jesus says to our inner skeptic, that part of us that is looking for the catch,  
the parts of us that are imprisoned like John,  
what do you hear and see? Look, listen

- a healing moment here or there – maybe brought about by the actions of those who are actively working on the recommendations of the TRC,
- a glimmer of light there, - refugees who have arrived among us and are received with love and assistance
- new insight – as in wisdom – that shifts longstanding injustice
- new hearing – as if for the first time an inner voice that gives new direction.
- strengthened hands and knees – for a task that seemed insurmountable
- the promise of crocuses, if not now, the assurance that they will return in the spring
- these are part of the vision of our hope coming to life.

And each of us has our own version of a little carving tool, where we can chip away at the darkness along with Christ.

As Teresa of Avila reminds us

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

But what if the despair and the darkness will not seem to budge no matter how we wield our little tool.

I want to honour that as a painful reality for some especially at this time of year.

That's when it is up to the rest of us to not only pray our longings as we did in the hymn:

Healer of our every ill

but also proclaim loudly and clearly the hope of our faith in the song we have yet to sing.

My Soul Cries Out... that the world is about to turn.

This is what we do for each other. This is what we do for those for whom the darkness has pressed so close there is no room for wielding even the smallest tool.

We do it for each other.

We hold the hope for each other .... just as Jesus did for John....

So that when our darkness closes in others will hope for us.

Each of us can be  
eyes for those who are blind,  
and ears for those who are deaf,  
and leap for those who are lame  
and the Divine and Holy Hope of our God will one day free us all to live  
into the vision God has promised.