



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The First Candle - Hope

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

December 1, 2013

Advent. I know that for many it's their favorite time of the year. It certainly is mine. This year, I am going to focus on the four great themes of the Advent wreath--hope, peace, joy and love. Great not just because each of the themes constitutes an essential element of the human experience but because together they represent the best of what God and the Church have to offer us in our journey through this time of expectation.

Our first week of Advent is all about HOPE. The other day, Pope Francis reminded us of why hope is so important, referring to one of the most interesting and meaningful phrases in our own *Book of Common Prayer*, "let not the hope of the poor be taken away." Hope is a desire for something, something better or perhaps more, something that may never be seen. The thing hoped for exists somewhere, even if only in someone's imagination. Hope flows out of a sense of dissatisfaction with how things are. Hope is the currency of the great prophets. They have always told people that a better day is coming.

When hope is deeply engrained, it takes a lot to undermine it. Having now been in Haiti twice, I think it's the people's sense of hope that strikes me the most. Despite centuries of oppression and calamity, the people are unfailingly grateful and hopeful. The people that walk for hours to come to one of the Global Health Ministry clinics do so with great hope. Most of them are not sick in a clinical diagnosis kind of way. Their main ailment is invisibility. Coming to the clinic is proof to them that the world knows they are there and in some small way, cares about their daily pain, their hypertension, and the parasites that are regular companions on their journey, their sleepless nights and their hunger.

When hope is validated, it is the best medicine. It melts despair and cynicism. When Martiale, the community leader in Kayimet brought his letter to Global Health last year, asking for money to buy the uniforms for the orphans and other families that could not afford one, I don't know how much hope he had that he would be successful. He actually got much more than he asked for. 60 school children have uniforms that say something profound to them and others. I belong; someone cares about me. I have since learned that the extra money that we sent for them to use for whatever they needed went for food because that's what they needed the most.

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I assumed that I would get another request and I was not disappointed although I was a little confused. Martiale brought me a letter asking for \$3500 to build two classrooms and a food storage room. When we visited Kayimet I learned of a much bigger plan. Martiale has managed somehow to buy a piece of land next to the existing school, which is three barebones structures, one is a lean-to with a tarp over it. His vision is for a real school for his community and it includes the proper storage space which will enable them to receive food shipments from the World Food Organization. But Martiale's hope doesn't stop there - there is another plot of land he hopes to buy so the village will be able to grow their own food. So I came home with the engineer/architect's plans for a school for Kayimet. \$78,400 is all that it will take. Hope usually takes more zeros than that! It's going to be fun! The most important thing that this school will do is to validate hope - this village will know beyond a doubt that dreaming big is not a pipe-dream. The children will have seen proof that hope is justified. And who know what they will do as a result. They could become they transformers of Haiti.

We heard last week from Peggy White Wellknown Buffalo, about the Crow people. Hope is pretty much all that they have. So much has been taken away that they have lost skills and motivation. They are hungry also. The \$400 that we have been sending each week has brought hope to Peggy and Susan, her partner in The Center Pole and to the families who now have the possibility of food on their tables. There is so much that they need, it is for us to decide how much we can or want to help with. They need buildings too, ones that keep out the howling winter winds. But the first goal of The Center Pole is education; getting young people off of the reservation and into universities. The reservation and Kayimet are not very different. Education broadens one's awareness and with that come the knowledge of all that is possible. Let not the hope of the poor be taken away.

Pope Francis went further than merely talking about hope. He identified the forces and powers that deny hope - particularly the economic inequality that enslaves too many people in the world. He's not a radical, he's preaching Christianity. He's preaching the expectations of God; that we all love and respect each other so that hope is not fool hardiness but a reasonable way of thinking.

The hope of Advent invites us to discover the heart and mind of God as revealed in Jesus, through his life and death. This is the hope of new birth, which offers us opportunities to gain new perspectives on our lives and our relationships with God. That is why education is important in the church as well, especially with our youth. The more we learn, about the nature of God, our role in God's mission, and our love for one another, the more hope we have that our own lives will be joyous and meaningful. Through the birth of Christ, and the life that followed it, God is revealed to us, inviting us deeper into a more meaningful, hopeful relationship.

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What a delicious thought. It's what we have to offer here; joy in learning of the great mystery and what it means for us, what it tells us about who we are. We are the stewards of this knowledge of this hope. It's so wonderful that its worth inviting someone to come and get a bit of it for themselves.

Now, as you doubtless know, the Episcopal Church is not one of those institutions that pushes itself on people in order to recruit them into membership. And yet, it feels like a wonderful source of hope to think there is a church home for each of us, that there is a community that wants us and cares for us. I ran across a great piece in the Huffington Post by a writer named Angela Jamene the other day that conjures up all of the wonderful images, feelings, and nuances of hope, when the church reaches out to us. Angela was one of those who scoffed at invitations to attend worship until one day she had a bit of an epiphany herself. It came as she was reading the Bible and suddenly realized what she was feeling - it was love and a connection to something magnificent beyond herself. She wrote this;

"That's what the person that has sent you countless emails and texts about next Sunday, or called you every Saturday night asking to pick you up in the morning, wants for you. Every card from your grandma with bible passages written on it means she wants this for you. Every flyer from your neighbor, or old high school friend, about another church event means they want this for you. Every invitation to church says 'I love you and I want this indescribable love, peace, and joy for you because I genuinely care about you.'"

This is the invitation of Advent. To know that there is a way of life that is kinder, more just, and more equitable. Advent and Christmas remind us that we are loved and that God wants us to know, truly and deeply. God's hope is that we will accept the invitation and become it for others. Trinity has become hope for the people of Kayimet and for the families on the Crow reservation who now have food. We are hope for each other in sad or dark times. Hope. It is to be cherished, nurtured, exercised, and most of all, given.

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