

“Wait with Hope – Becky’s Story”

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Sunday, December 2, 2018 / 1st Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

I think we’ve all heard the saying, “Hope is not a strategy.”

But what is left when we do not know which direction to go? For a lot of things in life we can “plan the work, then work the plan.” (That’s one of my husband’s favorite sayings.)

How do we plan the work of the end times? It’s not our work to do, and to be honest we couldn’t do it anyway. It’s God’s plan. It’s God’s work.

We just make the tea.

Our passages today come as promises from the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus.

Jeremiah, imprisoned at the time, is speaking to the Israelites who are watching and waiting for a Messiah. The prophet tells the people that God will keep all the promises made to the houses of Israel and Judah. They will return from captivity in Babylon and a “righteous Branch” will spring up for David. And there will be safety and salvation.

While Jeremiah is promising light in the darkness, Jesus is promising a time of darkness before the light of his power and glory in his second coming.

In advent, we wait for the second coming of Christ.

Every generation has had prophets and speakers of doom. Every generation has seen nation rise against nation. Distress and the roaring of the seas have brought fear and foreboding to the people of earth.

We live in that today.

It is not worth preaching advent if we pretend we are not living in scary times. There is ugliness assaulting us every day. The worst *of* humanity doing the worst *to* humanity. (I’m not being political this week, but you can read my thoughts!)

It is out of our control. We can not plan the work, then work the plan because so much of what happens leaves us in despair. We grasp but we cannot hold.

If I asked you a time in your life when you had to wait for something, good or bad, I know we could fill a book with the stories in this sanctuary today.

For me, there is one powerful story when our family was in darkness waiting for the light.

Doug and I have a blended, extended family. He brought two adult children and I brought four not-quite-adults into our marriage. We were not the Brady Bunch.

But last year, 2017, our family came together around my stepdaughter, Becky.

Becky’s story...

Becky’s wedding. After going through a divorce, Becky found a brand, new, true love when she met John. A perfect match. They were married in January of 2017. They created their own blended,

extended family. Becky has two children and John has three. It was a wonderful wedding and a truly joyous occasion.

One month after the wedding, Becky was diagnosed with breast cancer. The glow of the wedding dimmed. This was not right. This was not fair. We were all shocked and scared.

Becky had surgery and needed time to heal from that before beginning chemotherapy. We watched and waited and waited some more. It was a helpless kind of waiting. There was no plan. No work. Except for everything Becky had to go through. None of us could take her disease from her, it was hers alone.

Treatments began. Becky began her chemotherapy and every Thursday she and John went in together. John was Becky's supporter and protector. A chivalrous man if there ever was one.

Doug and I felt more of helplessness that comes with watching a child suffer. We tried to figure out what to do to let Becky know we were praying for her. We wanted her to know how much we loved her.

We fully understood that it was not Becky's responsibility to relieve *our* fears and anxieties about *her* cancer. She didn't need more phone calls asking her how she felt. She didn't need uninvited visits from people who just wanted to look at her. She didn't need more food brought to her front door.

So, we decided to send a white rose every Thursday to be delivered when she returned from chemo. Every Thursday chemotherapy, a rose, and a word.

Words:

Perseverance

Peace

Strength

Expectation

Confidence

Courage

Steadfast faith

Assurance

Optimism

Anticipation

Hallelujah! The Final Rose!

Every Wednesday I ordered the rose for Thursday. After the first two or three orders for a single white rose and a word, the young woman at the florist asked me who I was ordering them for. Who was "Becky?"

I told her about Becky and how we hoped a rose and a word would cheer and comfort her after her treatments. She was very sympathetic and then shared with me that her mother had just completed chemotherapy for breast cancer. She told me some of the things Becky might want to be aware of as her chemo progressed. She was very compassionate.

Within a couple of days, I received an email from the young woman at the florist. She had told her boss about Becky. About the cancer, the chemo, and the single white rose being delivered every Thursday. Her boss was moved and said that on Becky's last day of chemo, the flower shop would

send one dozen white roses to Becky as a gift and a celebration for finishing the twelve weeks of chemo.

Doug and I were moved beyond words. We were witnessing HOPE being shared by strangers. We were witnessing HOPE that could be spread with care and generosity.

One dozen white roses on the last day of chemo.

The very first rose we sent to Becky was the white rose of **HOPE**.

Pain and despair and illness and world affairs have the power to numb us to the good news of Jesus Christ. But we will not let ourselves be numbed by the creeping darkness.

We feel pain and fear and joy because we pay attention. We watch and listen and cry and rejoice. When we pay attention to our world, we pay attention to God's activity in the world. When we pay attention, we know how to be more generous, more forgiving, more loving, more aware of the needs of those around us.

Becky has been cancer free for over a year. Our blended, extended family continues to rejoice. And this includes the people at the florist, who somehow became part of this whole light-shining-through-the-darkness story. A young woman who paid attention and asked a question. "Who is Becky?"

I say again, Becky's husband, John, was and is a tower of compassion, strength, humor and support. John and Becky are a dynamic couple. Their love is fun to watch.

Maybe... hope *is* a strategy. Because our hope is so intricately entwined with our faith. We believe in a God who keeps promises. We are alert, with our heads held high. We pay attention to the signs, not just the signs of our time, but the signs of our lives. It's the way we know spring will come again when we see the first tiny flower poking up from the snow. Hope is the strategy, and faith is the work.

We have hope knowing the God of creation is also the God of salvation. No evil or ugliness on this earth, or in any person, can dim the light of righteousness.

Jeremiah talks about a "branch of righteousness." That was the hope he gave to the Israelites.

But I think more of hope in this way, "Low how a rose e'er blooming, from tender stem hath sprung."

Because I believe hope comes from a tender and tentative place. To hope takes gentle courage. To hope means seeing light where there may not be light. Yet.

We will wait in this advent season, not just with hope. But expectant hope. We will see the light that shines through the thickest darkness. We will watch with our heads high and our hearts open.

For the true rose of hope.

Amen.