

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
December 7, 2003

“What Then Shall We Do?”

~Luke 3:10

Here we are on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent. Here we are post-Thanksgiving holiday marching or otherwise zooming toward the high holy day of Christmas. Here we are - maybe even gaining some new insights on the miracle of the season as Kathy and I did recently while viewing the movie ‘Love Actually’ at the theater. The insight: that a lobster was apparently present at the birth of Christ. (How ironic we were in New England at the time) The movie has an exchange between mother and child, who is dressed as a lobster. “There was a lobster at the birth of Christ?” mother asks. The child flashes two fingers. “Two lobsters?” asks mother, looking quite perplexed.

“**Duh-uh!**” retorts the child.

Nevertheless, here we are in the month of December – as a member of our choir so aptly put it – that month which is none other than “dense.” Here are so many of our students weighted under the stresses of end of term and headed into finals week.

Same old same old perhaps many of us are thinking and feeling. Nothing new here. Another Advent. Another Christmas. Another week of finals. Another quarter ending. Same old same old. The verse with which our gospel text ended only moments ago seems appropriate: “What then shall we do?” We’ll come back to that shortly.

This is my fourth Advent at Stanford with many of you here in Memorial Church with whom I have had the pleasure of marking and celebrating these holy days. While four is hardly a dent in the grand scheme, the years have surely gone quickly by. And as I take a look out and up - at you this morning, I know many of you have been here for far more than four Advents. Many Advents in fact, each and every one filled with volumes of Advent hope, anticipation, and expectation. Every Advent of lighting the candles on the wreath there near the lectern; every Advent singing O Come O Come Emmanuel; every Advent our tradition of Lessons and Carols these subsequent two evenings this weekend

in early December. The routine of the familiar. And sometimes we might hope, either privately or publicly, that the otherwise deadening all too familiar routines might be changed or overcome once and for all or our deepening cynicism be transformed into resolute optimism. But truthfully, whether in routines or not, a habit or outlook of hopelessness has prevailed relentlessly in our nation, globe, economy, government, communities, workplaces not only since 9/11 but acutely in the year 2003. While Advent is indeed meant to be a season of hope, we might fear that more often it will yet be another season of disappointment.

Even though that seemingly evasive, elusive idea or prickly promise of hope - so clearly illustrated in the text from the letter to the Romans that Mary read for us - is unapologetically and consistently proclaimed: “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule..the one in whom they shall hope...may the God of hope fill you with all joy

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and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit....”

Even though try as we may through our very best efforts to resuscitate and revive this promise of hope each Advent and Christmas we are reticent to admit often that it’s the same old same old. With the bored young we can ask: are we having fun yet? Or with the cynical and questioning young we can make the declarative assessment ‘been there done that’ or ‘there’s no there there.’.

Consequently, what might I be able to say to you today, on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent that I have not said in Advents before? Probably not much. What are you to hear, expect, or look for this particular Advent that you haven’t heard or hoped for before? Probably not much. So, in the words of our text from the gospel of Luke, what then shall we do?

Allow me to return to the reference I made earlier to Advent as the season of hope. The season when we revere and worship the God of things that are not yet. The God of things that are yet to be. However, you and I both know in these days in which we live that real

hope, Christian, religiously rooted and grounded hope is not so easy to come by. Perhaps our hope fails us at times for lack of courage or imagination – or not hoping on a big enough scale – simply cheap or inadequate hope.

I read a story recently about the British ambassador to the U.S. who was interviewed at the height of the Cold War around Christmastime. Mr. Ambassador, what do you want for Christmas? asked a reporter from *The Washington Post*. The ambassador, a master of British reserve and understatement, not wanting to appear greedy but also wanting to be truthful, replied that all he really wanted was a jar of fruit preserved in ginger, such as one could acquire at Harrods. The *Post*’s Christmas article described in detail what the diplomatic corps hoped for for Christmas: The Russian ambassador hoped for peace and goodwill; the Swiss ambassador hoped for genuine disarmament around the world; the Israeli ambassador hoped for peace in the Middle East and so on and so forth. The British ambassador was recorded as hoping for a jar of preserved fruit. It is obvious that out of all of those things hoped for, the British ambassador’s hope was the most obtainable and he probably got what he wanted. However, in the recounting of this story it was pointed out that his hope seemed to lack a little in imagination or courage. Sometimes we do not hope enough.

On the contrary, sometimes our hope seems inevitably doomed and we do not dare ask for more than we can see amidst the harsh realities in which we live. I do not think I have to spend a great deal of time illustrating too much here – we know by virtue of the newspapers we read - conflict and destruction in Iraq and the Middle East; staggering statistics on the economy and unemployment; the slow and grinding withering of basic civil rights attributed to the Patriot Act; who really knows what the war on terror is honestly; we could enumerate so much here -- that there is plenty to keep all of us feeling rather gloomy and despairing at this juncture.

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Sometimes at this time of year hope also appears in such a form that you don't know whether to laugh or cry or scream. Recently in the San Francisco Chronicle a letter to the editor reported some priestly humor.

It read: A brief e-mail from a priest friend greeted me Wednesday morning: The consecration of Gene Robinson as bishop of the New Hampshire Diocese of the Episcopal Church is an affront to Christians everywhere. I am just thankful that the church's founder, Henry VIII, and his wife Catherine of Aragon, and his wife Anne Boleyn, and his wife Jane Seymour, and his wife Anne of Cleves, and his wife Katherine Howard, and his wife Catherine Parr are no longer here to suffer through this assault on traditional Christian marriage.

Hope may not be so much an act of will as it is an act of courage and imagination. When we say, "we hope that this will all end well" we might mean that we hope this life will not continue to go in the direction it is currently going. Some might say this is more of mindless optimism rather than hope.

One writer/theologian puts it this way: "The substance of hope is that somehow we will get through and go through this inevitable direction, because on the other side is that hope into which we believe we have been called and for which and by which we have been prepared all our lives. It is that kind of hope that doctors simply do not understand at the bedside of the dying; it is that kind of hope that is the ultimate resource available to the faithful, an act of imagination and courage, and both are required, for hope deals with what has not yet happened. Hope allows us to see beyond what is and to imagine, to see with our inner eye, what might and what ought to be. When we say, as we often do, that hope triumphs over experience, which is precisely what we mean. Left alone to a life of experience, where we deal with nothing but the facts, where we are content to address only the tangible, the material, the really real, the mundane, we are doomed to the accumulation, the sum total of that experience. Experience tells us only where we have been, like driving a car by the light of the rearview mirror; and there can be no ultimate satisfaction in the accumulation of that experience. Christian hope is meant to guide you

into the place where you have not yet been, and into becoming the person you have not yet become."

This is the radical dimension of what we say is the Christian faith and practice. It is not content with celebrating the things that are or worse still, celebrating things as they were or imagine them to have been.

Last Sunday, while celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday with family in Boston, we were able to worship at Harvard Memorial Church, where preacher Peter Gomes declared that "this is as good as it gets." "There is no good place in history to which we can turn and no time better than the present. This is as good as it gets and that is always the case for it is never good enough, he reminded us. If we live by the faith of nostalgia or sentimental history, or some time, any time other than the present, we are not seeing clearly. We are

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seeing only a partial picture, and fail to see that the gospel is not interested in either the confirmation of the past or the confirmations of the present.”

What then shall we do? We must remember and hold fast to the particularities of what we know of our Christian faith. That is, as it has always been, a prophetic one, speaking of the time to come, of things that are not yet, of places we have not been, of people we are becoming but not yet become. None of us, no place, no time is good enough, not yet. God’s redemptive work is still unfinished – the salvation of all flesh has not yet been realized, as the passage from Luke today declared. John the Baptist is the herald, the announcer of not only what God had done through Jesus Christ but also what God is still in the process of doing. All who hear the Word of God are called to declare what God is doing in our midst and to point ahead to the fulfillment of God’s reign. Today we witness John the Baptist as a forerunner, announcing the great things of God yet to come, a vision of a society redeemed and renewed by the vision of the prophets. As we will continue to see (and I know Scotty will continue further next week with this particular chapter of Luke and the verses following what we heard today) John the Baptist’s preaching shows that he held this vision before others, issued a challenge for them and

called them to repentance. This is an appropriate model for us to recover our vocation as those who possess a prophetic voice, an authentic hope, in our present time and secular culture.

Therefore, this Advent hope of which I speak is meant to be the sobering antidote to what others have called false Christmas cheer. Our optimism during this season, characterized by carols like ‘O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy;’ ‘O Come all ye faithful joyful and triumphant;’ and other habits such as movies (coincidentally Love Actually has been dubbed the “perfect antidote to cynicism”) and Broadway shows with happy endings or even our attitudes of suspicion toward people who don’t look like us or talk like us or come from different places because they spoil our optimism – all of these and more do not square with our perception of reality. We know there is no genuine peace on earth; we know there is no fundamental lasting goodwill to those with whom God is well pleased. And to quote Peter Gomes: “We know that the holiday season tends to bring out the worst, not the best, in people, particularly in our own families. I know, and I know you know, how much we dread Christmas because we are living with the paradox of great expectation on the one hand and grim reality on the other.”

Constant good cheer is hard to manufacture and even harder to sustain. All of which is aided by salespeople and countless ads, media outlets and every department store known to humankind.

But this is precisely why I love Advent, and why I am especially grateful to serve in a place such as this and be ordained in a tradition that celebrates the liturgical cycle and seasons. We can drag you kicking and screaming through Advent; asking you to confront the promises and their apparent lack of deliverance now; why we ask you to consider looking ahead and not back to the manger in Bethlehem; to light these Advent

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candles to lighten the darkness and not rest with only a rearview window view. It is why my job and Scotty McLennan's, and Peter Gomes, and that of every preacher in the realm of Christianity on these Sundays of Advent is to remind us of these promises and hopes

before us. What is your job? What then shall you do? Consider them. This you must do. Advent is not celebration, a moment for dancing around the candles. Advent hope is not an exercise in nostalgia or sentimentality or seasonal optimism. Advent is not celebration but fortification against the very forces that cause us despair and drag us downward.

Advent is has been said is an "exercise in endurance, in preparation for the long journey to a time and place where we have not yet been, and for which all of the past and all of the present are mere preparation."

Perhaps this is what Paul, in his letter to the Romans we heard today, was getting at when he wrote: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of scriptures we might have hope."

These Holy Scriptures are not a record of human achievement or even divine achievement, but a constant tale of human folly and story. Could it be that we are in fact meant to learn from them – their instructions and experiences? Written for our benefit, by holding on tenaciously, and by the encouragement contained within these holy texts, both positive and negative, we might have hope.

It may seem ironic that Paul was writing to a people in Romans, not unlike us, who knew the promises of God. He cites these promises as he recalls the prophet Isaiah's vision of one coming to rise up and one in whom hope would be found. But not only was he writing to a people who knew the promises, writes Peter Gomes, but who also knew the bitter experience of disappointment, of "hope deferred..."

Gomes understands this well as a black man. "Black people in America have never been optimistic, for we know better; but we have always been hopeful, full of hope. That is why we continue to sing "Lift Every Voice" and respond to the words – have not our weary feet come to the place for which our fathers sighed? He illustrates that this is not a

statement but a question to which we must answer a resolute *no we have not!* We have not yet come to the place for which our fathers and mothers have sighed, contends Gomes, and neither have you, not even the most well off of you, not even the brightest of you, not even the best of you, and to think that we have is to be sadly deluded. The Advent hope reminds us that this is true, and the Advent hope reminds us to take courage to hope in spite of circumstances, courage to persevere beyond the apparent and the convenient, not to take for granted who we are or where we are, or what we do."

To imagine the visions of the prophets, Isaiah in particular, to which John the Baptist recalls is to have the courage not of our convictions but of our imagination and our hopes.

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Perhaps the most courageous thing to do in desperate, disappointing times such as these is to affirm a steadfast hope out of all proportion to what passes for reality.

What then shall we do? We are to hope. Though we have been at war in significant ways preceding this Advent in a world which is far from people behaving decently, our spiritual war and the war for our souls is no less serious than that one, perhaps with the stakes even higher.

I am going to ask you to do something now that I have not done before with you following a sermon. I will ask you to stand and in the tradition of black churches and others ask you to repeat after me as a way in which we can collectively and individually take courage and use our imaginations for a hope-filled and hope-inspired Advent:

*Enable us O God, to be women and men of ceaseless hope.  
Every human act, every God-like act is an act of hope.  
Help us be people of the present  
Help us live each moment with courage and imagination  
For each moment, in all its imperfection and frustration  
Is pregnant with possibility, with future, with love, with God.*

*And may the God of hope  
Fill us with joy and peace in believing  
So that by the power of the Holy Spirit  
We may abound in hope.  
Amen.*

With thanks and acknowledgement to The Rev. Peter Gomes.