

Sermon for November 27, 2022—“The Hope of Advent”

First Sunday of Advent, Year A—Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:32-44

I recently read a story told by Roger Van Harn. It takes place in or around 1884, the year Clarence Wexler founded the town that bears his name.

Clarence drifted west from Paterson, New Jersey, prospecting not for gold but for coal. Coal mines were as good as gold when they were close enough to the Boston/New York/Trenton furnaces to connect by rail, and far enough west to ensure cheap labor. So it was that Clarence Wexler settled in mid-Appalachia to begin his dig.

Within ten years Wexler was a thriving mining town. Small at first, it drew hungry families from their languishing farms to share the hope of prosperity. New mining companies competed for land and labor. Main street was marked by Ted’s Tavern on the south and First Methodist Church on the north. Within one generation Wexler had added a school. After two, Wexler had its own doctor, post office, and library.

The stories told at family tables and holidays began to change as Wexler took on a history of its own. As memories of Clarence Wexler and the East dimmed, the town of Wexler generated legends and a lore of its own. The stories moved between prosperity and tragedy, progress and disaster. “Remember when” became a favorite pastime on winter evenings and at summer picnics.

The people felt undercurrents of both hope and fear in the stories. The fear of disaster deep in the mine shafts was always there, kept alive by the stories of the fires that took the lives of eleven fathers and brothers on one day and of nine other workers six years later. Reliving minor episodes that resulted in escape or rescue fanned hope and made the fear manageable.

While the stories of yesterday pointed to tomorrow, the skills for escape and rescue were needed today. All the mine workers were trained by veteran miners in escape techniques. These miners described desperate situations and taught survival skills and escape routes. They knew how to ration diminishing supplies of air, food, and water. If escape was possible, they knew how.

The townsfolk were trained in rescue operations. They staged practice runs involving men, women, and children. They could mentally draw maps of the mine shafts and knew the shortest and safest rescue routes. The miners knew what it would take to escape; their families knew how to rescue.

So when the people of Wexler felt the rumble on that May morning, everyone knew An explosion somewhere had caused a slide. Where was it? Shaft number Four. Who was in there? Thirteen fathers and brothers. It was crisis time, the time to work and pray for escape or rescue.

The thirteen absorbed the shock and kept their cool. They remembered what they had learned and practiced often. They knew what to do and what not to do. They rationed their supplies. They calmed each other. They sent their veterans to assess the situation and probe possibilities. Soon they knew the truth: if they were to live, they would need to be rescued.

They imagined what was happening above and outside. They knew how the whole town would gather to plan and work for their rescue. So they waited, shared their diminishing supplies, calmed each other, and—listened.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap-tap-tap. They heard it. Hope and fear pounded against each other. Help was on the way. The promise of rescue was sounding. They held on until, one by one, all thirteen squeezed through the opening to light and air. The people of Wexler had another story of hope to tell on winter evenings and at summer picnics.

Wexler folks knew the difference between optimism and hope—though they were not able to name it. Optimism was something they practiced through their escape training, techniques, and efforts. If only we do the right things, we can get out of this mess. If we save our resources, probe the possibilities, use the right tools in the right way at the right time, and don't panic, we can get out of this disaster. Optimism says: we can escape.

Hope arose when, fresh out of optimism, the trapped miners heard the tap-tap of the promise. They knew the unspoken promise that was built into their way of life: the town would shut down for a rescue operation whenever it was needed. They could picture what was happening above and outside. But when they heard the approach of the rescue team and could distinguish voices, they knew that help was near. That's hope.

The good news is that Advent does not depend on optimism, and here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: Advent is rooted in promise, the promise that makes hope a way of life for God's people. God's promises thread their way through the Scriptures and through history. Whether they are the promises spoken to Moses at the burning bush, to the elders of Israel when Moses brought his report down from atop Mt. Sinai, to David when he wanted to build a house for God, to the exiles who could not make their way home, or to Mary of Nazareth who had nothing to offer but herself, God's promises are the only sure source of hope.

Hope empowers. Hope sets in motion familiar themes in the Advent season: preparation, anticipation, waiting, and watching. So, because Advent is a season to rehearse the promises of God, Advent is a season for hope.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Source of All Hope.

Amen and amen.