



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Learning Hope

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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It has been 18 months of learning and unfolding grace since Peter and I adopted Juno, our beautiful black Lab from Texas. She was very sweet from the beginning, healthy but exhausted, confused and wary. She didn't know how to play and she was particularly afraid of men with something in their hands. Peter's golf clubs still send her cringing out of the kitchen to hide under the dining room table. I just hate knowing that that probably means someone hurt her. She is terrified of windy days and nights. I assume that she spent some pretty scary times out in storms with no way to feel safe. One good thing is that she has never been aggressive about food. She can never get enough of it but that's probably more a retriever thing than anything else.

We have seen her gradually relax into the environment of our home. She loves her job in the office as the official greeter and quickly trains all of her regulars to know just where the office stash of treat is kept. But, as with all dogs, it is hard to know how she processes all of this. An old fear may be triggered but what she remembers at other times is a mystery. We have no way of know if she has the capacity to compare her early life with the one she has now. It has been interesting for us to be a part of her journey from abandoned to joyous and increasingly goofy, just the way a black lab is supposed to be.

Juno came to mind as I began to contemplate Advent and its themes, particularly hope. I realized that before she got to us she was no doubt aware that she was miserable, scared, lost and hungry. But I doubt that she processed all of that with any sense of hope that things could be better. There was probably not any awareness within her that better times might come, that there was a place for her to be safe and loved, that home was waiting for her. Dogs live in the moment; hope is about something that has not yet come. Hope is a projection into the future, holding the vision of something better. She had no prophet to make such promises to her.

Advent is all about hope. It's about understanding what the coming of Christ into the human condition might mean. Isaiah has a lot to say about hope. Today's reading is the kind of hope that awaits an outside force to come and be so noticed as to make the mountains tremble and remind people of God's presence, power and love. The Gospel challenges us to stay awake so we are ready when a change will come. The Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven has been described for us in many passages- which is important because you can't hope unless you know of something better. That's where we are different from Juno. We know that things are not as they are meant to be. But my question for you on this first Sunday of Advent is whether or not

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you really believe in such hope? Do we actually believe that things can be different? Do we believe that peace will come and if so, how?

Do you believe in the Kingdom of heaven, do you believe in a force capable to diverting human history from its established trajectory. What do you believe when we pray together, "your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven?" Do you have hope or are you merely trying to survive, to make the best of things as they are?

So much of the Christian story has been focused on Heaven as our hope but only after death. Most people assume that this is what Jesus taught, but it isn't. The power of his message has been diluted and we have been liberated from the responsibility of living as if heaven were already here, as if we were truly the Body of Christ. To revisit last week's sermon, Jesus has been demoted from King of kings to Secretary of Afterlife Affairs. The Kingdom of Heaven has been placed out of our reach until after we are dead. That's what Christianity has taught, but it's not what Christ taught.

Omid Safi is the Director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and well known scholar and author of works on Islam, Muhammad, and particularly Islamic Mysticism. In his article for NPR titled *Heaven is not a Zipcode*, he challenges the traditional understanding of Heaven which is shared by Christians, Muslims, and some Buddhists. Mystics, those intensely spiritual people who have intimate experiences of the holy, have given us a different approach to understanding heaven, seeing it not as a place but as a state of being.

Rumi is the greatest of all of the mystics in the Islamic tradition; His poetry is incomparable. Dr. Safi wrote about Rumi's interpretation of one small passage from the Quran which is often read at funerals. "Oh, soul at peace! Return to your Lord, you are well-pleased with God, God is well-pleased with you. Enter in my servants and enter my heavenly garden." Rumi's interpretation hangs on the small word, the preposition *in*. This passage of scripture is most often understood as an invitation for a soul to enter into the garden of Heaven. But Rumi turns it around and presents to us a soul at peace, entering into the soul of another - the servant - and finding and creating heaven. Dr. Safi says,

Heaven is not a place. Heaven is to be found inside the hearts of those who are already at peace with God. When one of these souls loves us and takes us inside their hearts, we are taken into a heavenly state.

Heaven is not a place. Heaven is not a zip code. Heaven is not a place with walls and pearly gates. No guardians to keep us in, or out. We ourselves are the guardians keeping ourselves out of that heavenly state.

Heaven is about a state of peaceful tranquility. If and when we achieve it, including here and now, we are already in the Garden.

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We alone can reach this state, yet we do not reach it alone. It is possible that we cannot reach it alone. We reach it when we take in other human beings into our hearts' inner paradise, and when others take us in to their hearts.

This teaching is no different from the words of Jesus, *Abide in me as I abide in you. And love one another.* In this season of Advent, we prepare ourselves for this holy invasion. Just as Jesus will be born to one woman, in one place, at a particular time, Christ will be born in each of us when we are ready. When we have learned how to live in peaceful tranquility, without anger and outrage, no longer assailed by fear of lack or hardship, or other people, or desolate loneliness, or of our own failings - then the one who comes will come into our hearts and heaven will be found in us.

Does that sound like hope, something that you hope for, or does it sound like hard work? I think it should sound like both. The promise of the coming of Christ is to give us the knowledge that we hold the seeds of heaven within us and that we will be shown the way to become a garden and thereby become hope for the world.

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