

# A Season of Hope

Traditionally, the four Sundays of Advent are designated Peace, Hope, Joy and Love. This Advent, we are especially thinking about Hope.

So what is it? It's not as easy to define as you might think. Specifically, how is Hope different from Faith? Believing in life after death? That's faith, isn't it? Believing that God will save? Faith, again. Believing that God answers prayer? Faith. Believing that God will never leave us or forsake us? Faith. So what is Hope?

The Book of Job tells the story of a man who lost everything. First he lost his possessions, then his family, then his health. Last of all, he lost his faith. His faith before his calamity was a comfortable faith based on his conviction that the world was just and orderly and could be understood by humans. In the coherent universe of Job's old faith, good people were rewarded and evil people were punished, and everything would eventually make sense. But when he, who had always been faithful to God, found himself enduring wretched suffering and grief, his old faith could no longer stand.

In Job's new world, suffering was random, order was illusory, and the uni-verse was a huge, sick joke without compassion or meaning. The people he loved and whom he thought loved him only added to his pain. His wife left him, and his friends came to visit only to reassure themselves that nothing like Job's agony could ever happen to them.

For Job, faith no longer made sense. And yet he never lost hope. Yet in the midst of his pain, in the disequilibrium of no longer believing all that once gave him comfort to believe, Job clings to hope. In Job 14 he says: If a man dies, will he live again? If so, I would wait for God until my last breath. In Job 19, I know that my redeemer lives, and at the end, he will appear, and I would see him with my own eyes. In Job 21, If I could just approach God, would he condemn me? No, I think he might listen.

It would be too much to call this Faith. What Job has is simply a refusal to give up on God. He can see absolutely no reason to trust this God, who Job feels has let him down, but he can't let go of God either. From the pit of his own absurd, random suffering, he can't bring himself to say with faith, "Yes! I still believe." The best he can muster is, "Maybe."

That's hope. Hope is what faith looks like when everything else has been stripped away. When the creeds make no sense, when the confident affirmations of the faithful are only irritating, when you have no answers and no longer even expect any, but you aren't quite willing to give up, that's hope. Hope doesn't affirm what is; it only affirms what might be possible.

Hope is looking on a feeble, helpless child born to a laborer and a teenage girl, a roughly-wrapped newborn lying in an animal's feed trough, and say-ing, "Maybe."  
Whatever your darkness; Hope.