

Homily December 1 2024 First Sunday of Advent Second Coming © Teresa Elder Hanlon 2024
Jeremiah 33:12-13, 15-16; Psalm 89; Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 1:5-25 (Zechariah's Annunciation)

In a lecture I attended many years ago, dream expert Jeremy Taylor said that after several decades of experience, he could confidently say that all dreams that come to us in our sleep are intended for healing. This statement stayed with me because I have many weird and bizarre dreams and, at that time, nightmares. However, when I open dreams with my spiritual director or a dream therapist, even the nightmares, they reveal things that are necessary for me to heal, to see differently, to gain wisdom.

These readings purposely pick up on the teaching of the second coming. The opening song highlighted this hope that the second coming would be brighter and somehow more convincing than even the resurrection – that a power of love and life and light over despair, death and darkness will arrive and heal oppression and pain. 2000 years ago such hope was strong. Increasingly, though, for many believers including myself, this hope of imminent change through a second coming of Christ feels doubtful.

Today's readings are about hope in a time of doubt, disaster, pain or shame. Hope that “justice and integrity” as Jeremiah says, will return to a ruined land. Hope for healing. Hope as *Small Man* Paul, in the second reading, expressed that our love for each other and for all people [will] grow deep and wide”, just as his love did for the community in Thessalonica.

It is fitting that on this First Sunday of Advent that we light the candle of hope. When I consider the ruin of war in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan or the fouled waters in North America, that only a couple hundred years ago were clean enough to drink, how profound a believable voice of restoration and renewal would be. To hear such a voice could bring about hope.

There are ways to heal relationships of all kinds and the Indigenous wisdom of tens of thousands of years of relating to the earth's lessons was not totally destroyed by colonial mentality and takeover. It is still alive. However, I can easily relate to Zechariah. I doubt.

It is not easy to believe some things – like Zechariah's dream or vision where he's told something utterly fantastic, and because of his practical, left-brain nature—his reasoning based on his experience—he questions the possibility of Elizabeth becoming pregnant. This message, even in a direct encounter with God's messenger, is one Zechariah doubts.

To have hope means that we trust something that often we cannot see or figure out or control ourselves. It means that we begin to see experiences from the past that were devastating and somehow – with a kindness, or unexpected turn—are now associated with some kind of a gift.

So, what was healing about Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel, this heavenly being, one close to Creator? The outcome of his disbelief was that he was struck dumb. Shut up. He had to find ways other than speech to communicate. This, I believe was healing for him.

Obviously, Gabriel pinpointed where his doubt came from: rationalizing that old age meant no pregnancies. He had lived many years of failure to produce a child. Not using the left and logical side of his brain helped Zechariah through those nine months to see the world differently.

There was hope in this vision. "Those who dream change everything," the contemporary music group, The Many, sing. God's way, delivered through the spirit messenger Gabriel, was not to punish, but to bring about change. The encounter was believable, but what he heard in that vision was tough.

Zechariah needed a lesson in the value of listening and believing in the power of the Holy One. The best way to do that, in this circumstance, Gabriel figured, was to stop him from talking. In listening workshops, and on LICCF's third Sundays in-person in the library, when people share, I often mention that when we are the listener, we do not move our lips. And so, for nine months Zechariah did not speak. John the Baptist grew up with a changed father. One whose doubt became trust. His despair became hope. His trust in the possibility of the impossible happening grew exponentially. Today, we are invited to dream.

Where is Hope found today? As mentioned, we can find hope when we pay attention to the messages of the earth, who knows how to restore herself. We can listen to our own dreams with an expectation of healing. And when we pray, we can hope like in the message of *Small Man* Paul to the Thessalonians, that Christ will bring us face to face again with those who love us – especially when we are separated by conflict, argument, war, or hardship.

Elizabeth prayed in her heart, "The Giver of Breath has looked upon me with kindness and has taken away my shame. Now I will have respect in the eyes of my people." Her teaching to us today, is that it is wise to believe in an abundant God, even in a time of desolation. Listening with hope changed not only how she saw the world, but how she felt the world would see her – no longer stereotyped as worthless, but seen as one who was worthy of bearing good fruit. The common image of women as unworthy in the world still today, as less capable or unfit, has changed a little and can change more still.

We might consider today, what are my deepest desires, my dreams for change? When does our practical nature, like Zechariah's get in the way of hope? And when, like Elizabeth, do we recognize God's grace, God's face?

Thank you for listening.

QUESTION What images, feelings, words or phrases stay with you from the liturgy so far?

When have you waited a long time for something, but not given up hope? Or perhaps given up hope and then been surprised?