

## TRAIL MARKERS OF ADVENT

### 1) Hope

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When backpacking in the Sierra, it is important to be able to recognize the strategic use of trail markers—either on trees or on the ground. While many of the trails in the Sierra are in relatively good shape due to frequent usage, there are certain sections leading through either snow or rolling granite that are difficult, if not impossible, to follow without the assistance of trail markers.

When traveling through snow country, these markers are found in the symbol that resembles a lower case “i” cut into the bark of a tree. When traveling across granite landscape, the trail is often marked with the use of “ducks,” three or four granite stones piled one on top of the other. These markers can become an invaluable tool in finding one’s way across an otherwise confusing landscape.

As we begin this season of Advent, we begin a journey that leads us to the stable at Bethlehem. But the journey that we take can be misleading and confusing. There are, you see, those sections of trail along the way that seem to disappear in the midst of all the distractions and we find that it is very easy to lose the trail and discover that we are heading in the wrong direction.

Fortunately, however, there are trail markers that we can use to enable us to stay on this elusive trail as it winds its way through the challenging landscape of consumption, stress and distraction. These markers, as you will recognize, are set out for us during every Advent season. But they are so familiar that we sometimes fail to even notice them, let alone allow them to guide us on our way. These markers are known to us as hope, peace, joy and love. As we journey through this season of Advent, we will be reflecting upon the meaning of these markers and the direction that they provide for each one of us.

We begin this Advent trek then at what we might refer to as the “trail head” of hope. Every Sierra trail has a trail head, a place in which the journey begins. Our Advent journey begins with our reflection upon the meaning and significance of hope. This, of course, is only appropriate as the biblical texts of Advent are grounded in the ancient hope of the people of Israel for the deliverance of God. This was both a generic hope for deliverance and a specific hope. This morning, we will consider the more generic hope—that is a hope not focused upon the more specific prospect of a Messiah, but a more generalized hope for a God who will simply show up—a God who will wake up—a God who will listen to and respond to the prayers and pleas of a people living in deep despair and hopelessness.

The setting, as best we can tell, is likely in the Northern Kingdom of Israel after its defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 721 BCE. The glory days of a united monarchy under David and Solomon have since given way to not only a divided

kingdom, but now, a conquered northern kingdom. Defeat and despair have replaced what was once glory and honor and the conquered people of the northern kingdom of Israel find themselves with their backs against the wall.

It is likely in this context that our lesson from Psalm 80 was originally expressed. Notice that the writer holds nothing back in this dramatic plea to God. God is addressed as the Shepherd of Israel, which was another way of referring to God as protector, defender and King. It is clear that the writer isn't exactly convinced that God is living up to their agreement. The inference is that God has been missing in action and that perhaps, God has been asleep while God's people have paid a severe price, eating the bread of sorrow and drinking the cup of grief. They have, according to the writer, been humbled before their neighbors as they have been mocked by their enemies. Not a very encouraging picture, is it?

And yet, significantly, the writer is not just venting against God in a fit of hopeless despair. No, if we read this Psalm carefully, we can see that in spite of the note of lament, the writer is ultimately motivated by the prospect of hope. This hope is crystallized in a threefold plea found in verses 3, 7 and 19. In each of those verses, the Psalmist cries out, **"Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved."**

It is clear that the Psalmist has not given up hope, but is merely recognizing the obvious: Any hope for Israel's healing and restoration is a contingent upon the shining face of God. The hope of Israel's salvation is dependent upon God's presence and God's power.

At this point, it might be helpful to take a moment to define our terms. Hope is, after all, a somewhat nebulous word, a word that may mean different things to different people. **Eugene Peterson**, author of **"The Message,"** provides some helpful insight when he distinguishes between wishing and hoping:

**"Wishing, is something all of us do. It projects what we want or think we need into the future. Just because we wish for something good or holy we think it qualifies as hope. It does not. Wishing extends our egos into the future; hope grows out of faith. Hope, is oriented to what God is doing; wishing oriented toward what we are doing...To cultivate hope is to suppress wishing—to refuse to fantasize about what we want, but live in anticipation of what God is going to do next."**

Given this understanding, it is important to note that the writer's sense of hope has little to do with wishful thinking, but is, instead, clearly rooted in the anticipation of what God is going to do next.

I recently became a member of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when I received an I-Phone as a birthday gift. It is, as many of you know, a pretty amazing device. One of the features that I know it has, but I have yet to use is what is referred to as "face time," the technology that allows for face to face conversations between I-Phone users. This, of course, adds another significant dimension to our ability to communicate

with one another. By seeing the face of the one we are talking to, we can better understand the subtle meaning of their words—words that are not as easily discerned in an email or text message.

**Face time makes our communication much more personal.** The Psalmist understood this only too well: **“Let your face shine, so that we might be saved!”** The Psalmist’s plea is for “face time” with God, for the tangible sense of God’s presence that provides for a deep and abiding hope for a people lost in confusion and weighed down with despair.

This, of course, represents the timeless human yearning for connection and communion with the Holy—our longing for God’s presence and power restoring us to wholeness once more. The plea of the Psalmist is a plea that might just as easily come from our own contemporary lips: **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”**

We can hear this longing for restoration the angry cries of the “Occupy” protesters who feel that they have little reason for hope in a world of growing disparity between those who have and those who have not. Without jobs and without income, their hope is in short supply. **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we might be saved.”**

We can feel this longing in the disillusionment of many over the inability of our government to move beyond bitter partisan politics as our legislators cling to party lines and special interests, while ignoring their responsibility of working together for the common good. **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”**

We are stunned and perhaps, numbed by reports of tragic sexual abuse and the failure of those in positions of power to respond in ways that protect and safeguard the rights of our children. **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”**

And, although it is harder to identify or pinpoint, we are mindful of the anxiety and confusion that we feel in a world that is changing so rapidly that we are hardly prepared to recognize the immensity of the change, let alone adapt to its demands. **“Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved.”**

Suffice it to say that the Psalmist’s plea might well be our own. For we live in a broken and turbulent time—a time in which it is difficult to find the silver lining of hope in the dark cloud of despair that has settled over our world. People are angry, frustrated, bitter and disappointed—and who can blame them? Genuine hope, it seems, is a rare commodity indeed. Where in the world can it be found?

To quote Peterson, it is not to be found in merely wishful thinking—wishing for what we want, but in learning to live in anticipation of what God wants—of what God is going to do next. The biblical witness is quite clear that what God wants is a world in which

justice lives and harmony heals...a world in which values are shaped out of consideration for the common good—and not individual desire...a world where, to quote Isaiah, “they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

It is, I believe, the vision of a world worthy of our reflection as we stand, this morning, at the trail head of Advent. For it is a vision that invites our hope...a vision that summons our **anticipation** of what God is going to do next. But more than that, it is a vision that also invites our **participation** in the work that God is about to do. For while it is true that we are dependent upon the face of God to heal our brokenness and restore us, God will not act independently to make that happen. No, God’s way is to act in and through us to bring about the world that God desires...a world renewed and restored, a world healed and made whole.

In her poem entitled, “Hope,” Emily Dickinson likens hope to a courageous little bird.

**Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune--without the words,  
And never stops at all,**

**And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.**

**I've heard it in the chillest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet, never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.**

**Hope is indeed, that little bird that perches within our soul, singing the tune without the words, never stopping at all.** What might that mean for you in the tune you choose to sing this Advent season? In what specific ways might you make room for hope to perch within your soul? What lives might you touch? What gifts might you share? What witness of love and service might you offer?

In the midst of a dark and difficult time, we begin our Advent journey this morning, standing at the trail head of hope. While there may be a hundred and one reasons to give into the feeling of despair, there is one reason for refusing to do so that trumps all of them. **And that reason lies not only in our anticipation of all that God is doing, but in our participation in all that God will yet do in and through us. The face of God shines its brightest in the lives of those who understand that they are the hands and the feet of God and that they are called to be harbingers of hope in a turbulent time.**

**So let us make room for hope, the thing with feathers that perches in our souls and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all. Amen!**

