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Advent 2B
Peace, Seattle
December 4, 2011
Isaiah 40:1-11

HOLDING THE CORD OF HOPE

Daylight is precious these days, and growing more so. By 4:20 each afternoon the sun is gone over the horizon, and each morning on its low arc through the sky it rises later as it moves relentlessly toward the winter solstice—the northern hemisphere's shortest day and longest night.

It always feels like a descent to me, this movement into darkness, and it's accentuated this year by another El Niña winter, with greater than normal rain and mountain snow.

As a kid in Minnesota, I loved venturing out this time of year in the wildest blizzards Mother Nature could conjure. Thoroughly bundled against the elements with nothing but a small slit for my eyes, I would trek through the neighborhood, tromping through swirling snow drifts, awed and exhilarated as the storm propelled me into the experience its dark fury.

After such a foray into darkness, returning to the light and warmth of home and hearth was a revelation: *Ah! What grace! What wonder! What gratitude!*

I'd heard the stories about blizzards so terrible that folks in the country would get lost between farmhouse and barn, only to be found days later after the storm subsided. But as a town kid it was beyond my ken to imagine anything like that could ever happen to me.

We mark this holiday time with displays of glitz and glitter and erect strings of lights on our homes and businesses that will shine through these December nights. But behind these displays is, I think, a primitive urge to do what we can, in whatever way we can, to fight against the encroaching dark. And that darkness comes in many forms.

- Struggles in marriage and family life that keep us awake at night
- Frequent trips to the hospital that dominate our days
- Project deadlines at school or work that sap declining reservoirs of energy
- Headlines that scream crisis after relentless crisis
- Divorce, loss of job, PTSD, failing health; all these somber realities leave their mark even more deeply during this season of sun-challenged days.

The ancient Greeks didn't know about light displays in December, but they knew the nightmare scenarios that populate the human story.[1]

It began, Fred Niedner writes, with their old myth about Pandora.

> "Her curiosity got the best of her and she opened the beautiful box of ills and evils the gods had trapped inside. Amidst the ensuing racket of pain, anger, and quarreling, Pandora heard another small voice inside the container."
>
> "When she lifted the lid again, Hope came forth and began at once to soothe humankind's new wounds and heartaches."

The Bible's oldest word for hope, Niedner points out, is "tikvah," which also means cord or thread.

[1] See Fred Niedner article. Quotations come from his article this week in the *Indiana Post Tribune*: http://posttrib.suntimes.com/news/niedner/9156003-452/fred-niedner-amidst-the-dark-and-fear-hope-still-appears.html

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It was once standard practice for Midwest farmers to fix a line between farmhouse and barn during the winter months. When properly secured, the fixed rope could be a lifesaver, providing guidance and a safe traveling route through the most debilitating blizzards.

The meaning of the Biblical cord, like that fixed line, is obvious. "In the darkness, beset by fears, threats and enemies known and unknown, we sometimes find ourselves clinging to a single thread [or rope] that keeps us going from one moment to the next. Without hope, some solitary cord from which to suspend our lives, the darkness would have us."[2]

These words from Isaiah 40 this morning served as that cord, that TIKVAH, for a whole community of people who had come to know the darkness of exile. The land of Judah had been devastated and her people taken captive by the armies of Babylon. Jerusalem was utterly destroyed, its Temple, the center of all that mattered, lay in ruins. Forced into exile, God's people wondered aloud if Yahweh himself had been vanquished.

In Babylon, the exiles "faced an empire that seemed to circumscribe and limit and dictate everything," notes Walter Brueggemann.

> "The [exiled] community…came within a whisker of being able to imagine its future only in the terms permitted and sanctioned by Babylon, a sure program for despair and diminishment. Into this scene of shriveling comes the prophet of Isaiah…the most vigorous, most daring, most imaginative of all the voices of faith in the exile, offering in the midst of the suffering and despair of his people a voice for radical new possibility."[3]

COMFORT YE! COMFORT YE MY PEOPLE! SAYS YOUR GOD.
SPEAK TENDERLY TO JERUSALEM, AND CRY TO HER
THAT WARFARE IS ENDED, AND HER INIQUITY ACCOMPLISHED.

(If you're have a hard time this morning listening to Isaiah's voice without hearing the strains of Handel's MESSIAH in the background, you are forgiven!)

What follows on to these opening verses are two voices (at least) going back and forth, one bearing the message of hope and future, and the other testifying to the stark realities of life against which the cord, the TIKVAH, is strung.

Verse 3:

A VOICE CRIES: IN THE WILDERNESS PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD.

Verse 6:

A VOICE SAYS: "CRY OUT!" AND I SAID, "WHAT SHALL I CRY?" ALL PEOPLE ARE GRASS, THEIR CONSTANCY IS LIKE THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD. THE GROSS WITHERS, THE FLOWER FADES WHEN THE BREATH OF THE LORD BLOWS UPON IT; SURELY THE PEOPLE ARE GRASS.

And verse 9:

O ZION, LIFT UP YOUR VOICE WITH STRENGTH, O JERUSALEM…LIFT IT UP, DO NOT FEAR; SAY TO THE CITIES OF JUDAH, "HERE IS YOUR GOD!"

The language of judgment and warning that dominated the first 39 chapters has been replaced by the language of tender compassion and hope. The LORD, will come with strength, but not like

[2] Fred Niedner, the *Indiana Post Tribune*: http://posttrib.suntimes.com/news/niedner/9156003-452/fred-niedner-amidst-the-dark-and-fear-hope-still-appears.html
[3] Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Pages 65, 66.

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a warrior—no—God will come like a shepherd, feeding his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms, carrying them in his bosom, gently leading the mother sheep.

God's exiled people couldn't imagine this language, much less invent it. It had to come from OUTSIDE them, and it did. And what was so radical about it and radically new, is that it pointed them forward—toward a future that the prophet said God was creating for them!

For some folks, that word of hope must have sounded like so much commercial hype about how life will improve if only you purchase this item, invest in this product, and they wanted nothing of it.

Of the exiles who heard this word, Brueggemann writes:

> "Most refused the offer [to return home]. Most stayed with the empire, which seemed to have all the goodies. [But] Some few took a chance on the poetry. They are the ones who have kept faith for us and who have kept open a future for us, offered in the resounding poetry that persists against the empire and has not been fully silenced, even until now."[4]

COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE! Becomes….PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD!

How are we to imagine our future? Where is God beckoning us to go? Are our lives as individuals and the life we share as a community to be managed primarily through a look at the past? Where does the TIKVAH lead? If we are going to keep anchoring ourselves in God, the cord can only lead to the future.

This last week I had the opportunity to visit one of the sites run by a wonderful organization I'm just becoming acquainted with called (are you ready?) NEW FUTURES.[5] (Our own Jenn Ramirez Robson became executive director this fall.)

New Futures is about creative partnerships between families and educators to ensure that children have safe and nurturing relationships and their families have the opportunities to support their children's growth and success in school and life. This vision gets incarnated in after school programs that serve traditionally underserved communities whose first language is not English.

Many of the participant families come from refugee communities. Refugees are, in many ways, exiles in their own right. They have been forced to leave the home they've known, to live—many times for years—in refugee camps, and then have found themselves in a country with different weather, different language, different food, different customs, different everything.

New Futures offers them a place to belong. One of the most telling statistics in the New Futures program is that 80% of the families who participate end up with the firm belief that people in their community care about them.

The program is so successful that scores of families are on waiting lists. The site I visited was at the Woodridge Apartments, in Boulevard Park. Elementary kids were off to swim at the "Y", so I got to share a little time with staff and high school kids in the program.

The Woodridge program is housed next door to the senior housing where one of our Peace saints, Helen Greenfield, lived out her final years. Some of you remember Helen and her exuberant persona.

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[4] Ibid, p. 67.
[5] Check out their mission @ http://newfutures.org/about-us/

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As I sat with the kids, I was asked to share about what was most valuable or meaningful for me in my work as a pastor. One of the things I told them about was the privilege of seeing the impulse of generosity being expressed in ways that extended beyond the lifetime of the giver, and I used Helen as a case in point. The intern program at Peace captivated her heart and she wanted to leave a legacy to support the training of future church leaders. Her gift is still being used.

Helen is an example of someone who lived with hope. And where was her hope anchored? Where was her TIKVAH strung? Her hope and her cord were anchored in the God who turns exile into opportunity; who turns dead ends into new futures.

And what about our hopes? Our futures?

When we light the candles of our Advent wreath at home, we repeat one simple phrase that grounds us in this season of dark nights:

"*Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome."*

The cord to which we fasten our grip must be anchored in something beyond ourselves. The line that leads to Jesus, in the end, is the one with staying power that endures even when we do not.

Let me close with the words, once again, of Fred Niedner:

> "Most days, lifelines that connect us to family, community, and various institutions or experts suffice. But on what firm hook does the whole remarkable but cranky lot of us hang? I suspect the whole world depends on the same trusty but mostly ignored hands so many of us will count on when we inevitably lose our grip on hope's thin cord. Some may deem such hope a foolish gamble. Perhaps it is, but here in the darkness, we have nothing to lose by clinging to it tightly as we can."[6]

Let us pray:
Jesus Christ, light of the world, shine upon us and shine through us in these dark days, bringing comfort and hope to all who are bowed down. Anchor us to a hope that is firmly attached to the future you imagine for us when we cannot see our way forward, and let us become, by your Spirit and through our mission, cords of hope for others. Amen.

[6] Op. cit. Emphasis mine.