

December 3, 2017
HOPE when Santa is not enough: What is Advent?
Isaiah 42:1-9

All I wanted for Christmas was a Tonka car. It couldn't be ANY Tonka car, it had to be a Tonka **VW BUG**. It couldn't be any Tonka VW Bug, it had to be a **RED** Tonka VW Bug. So, I wrote a letter to Santa. Lo and behold, on Christmas morning, there it was! In the pre-internet era, I'm sure I gave Santa conniptions. His elves worked overtime that year.

Back in my day, the rumour was Santa would bring you any **thing** if it wasn't too big and didn't cost too much. But when our cat got sick one Christmas, I discovered that getting a cat better was not a "thing"; Santa couldn't help with that one. I wondered if Santa ever had a cat die. I wondered if Santa ran home every day because he was afraid of the school bully. I wondered if Santa ever fell off his bike, cut this knee, put a hole in his new pants, and got in trouble? Did Santa ever worry about what he was going to be when he grew up? What hope is there when you face real problems in life?

As I got older, I began to think about God. As a child, it seemed to me God was a bit like Santa. He lived way out there somewhere but no one actually saw Him. He lived forever. If you prayed (instead of a letter), He's supposed to give you everything you want. Right?

- What good did a God who lived a way out there somewhere do me? How could he possibly understand my life? My problems?
- What good was a God who never had to deal with losing someone you loved, or bullies, or getting cut, bleeding, and losing your only decent clothes?
- What good was a God who supposedly could give you things, when what I wanted was someone who understood me, who loved me (unconditionally), who could give me wisdom for the BIG decisions in life, and who gave me hope?

When I was facing some real-life crises, God – a Santa God – provided no hope.

Yearning for more than Santa

I have discovered lots of people who are also yearning for God. But the only god they know about is a Santa-type God: He's way out there; you pray to Him; He's supposed to give you stuff. But what we want is not Santa, but a gritty, down-in-the-trenches God who meets us in the real challenges of real life. We need hope in the mucky muck of real life.

For centuries, in fact, people have been crying out for this kind of an encounter:

- *"Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"* (Psalm 10:1)
- *"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"* (Psalm 13:1-2)

- *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?"* (Psalm 22:1)

The Old Testament is full of people crying out for God, just like me. They are desperately yearning for a God who understands, for a God who can help, for a God who is near, for a God who is there in the challenges, joys, struggles, and heartaches of real life.

Sometimes God did provide people with **things**. When His people wandered in the wilderness, He provided water and food for them every day, day in, day out. God gave His people land, crops, miraculous deliverance from enemies, victory in battle. At the moment, His people were often thankful. Then they just took His gifts for granted. They started complaining. They forgot God and His blessings. They drifted away.

Wouldn't it be great if God miraculously gave us land, houses, food, victory over our struggles? We'd praise His name forever, right? We'd be so happy, right? We'd never forget, right? Maybe. Probably not. We take His gifts for granted. We drift away.

Things are great. But they don't meet our deepest needs. There must be more. We really need a God who understands us, who loves us (unconditionally), who can give us wisdom for the BIG decisions in life. We need real, genuine hope and strength in the face of life's BIG challenges. We need a bigger-than-Santa God.

Hope in the dark places

Throughout the Old Testament, as God's people cry out, God hears His people. Yes, He does provide practical stuff/things along the way – from water to homes, from deliverance from enemies to healing. But there is a deeper theme of hope that deals with deeper issues. We don't live by bread alone. We need hope in our souls. We need hope in our hearts. A Messiah, God Himself, will come into our world.

- *"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him "God with Us" (Hebrew: "Immanuel").* (Isaiah 7:14)
- *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever"* (Isaiah 9:1-8).
- *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations ..."* (Isaiah 42:1)

This is what Advent is all about. "Advent" means "coming." It's a time we set aside to think about what the "coming" of God into our world might mean in our lives, in MY life.

Who is "the Servant"? Originally, all people were created to be God's stewards/servants to care for His creation: they disobeyed and took it for themselves. Later, the people of Israel were called to be God's servant: Abraham and his family were to be a blessing, sharing His love and grace to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). They never did that. Then a "faithful remnant" among the people of Israel, those who really loved God, were to be the servants of God bringing hope; that never worked. Then just the family of King David were to be God's blessing: seduced by wealth, women and power, they became corrupt and evil.

Finally, God promises a Messiah (literally "anointed one"). This person is fully human yet fully "God with us." He would NOT come as the military hero the Jewish people wanted, soaking the land with everyone else's blood. He would come as a servant, faithfully serving God and serving His world with love, care, and compassion, people were created for (Genesis 2:15). The hopes and dreams of all the years would come together in Him.

Standing on this side of history, we see this fulfilled in Jesus. In fact, these verses from Isaiah 42 are quoted in Matthew 12:9-21. Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand, after touching and healing a dead girl and a man with leprosy, and been touched by a bleeding woman ... all things that no reputable Jewish man would ever do. Only a servant would do such things. "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,*" Jesus says (Matthew 20:28). Jesus – the Messiah – comes to real people in real life and brings God love, God's hope, and God's healing into the dark, dirty, hard, hurting places.

What is "the Servant" like? "*He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets*" (42:2). Jesus doesn't come into the world or into our lives boasting His crowd is bigger than someone else's crowd, tweeting about how great He is, or how we should thank Him for stuff. He comes into our lives to listen. Willing to journey with. Willing to touch. Willing to care. That's what we need.

As you look through Jesus' life, He understands what it means to be a refugee, lose a loved one, be alone, be poor, be loved by some and despised by others, be threatened, be turned on by a close friend, be falsely accused, be beaten, lose everything he owns, even die. There is nothing we go through He cannot empathize with.

Isaiah paints two pictures of the Servant Messiah. In the first image, "*A bruised reed he will not break*" (42:3). Strong winds have flattened the reeds in a marsh; they've been trampled down. We are those reeds. Jesus, God-with-Us, wades into the muck, and gently lifts up each bruised reed. This God, who Himself faced the storms of life, gets His feet dirty in our lives and tenderly lifts us up.

The second image, "*a smoldering wick he will not snuff out*" (42:3), is of an old-fashioned oil lantern with a flax stalk as a wick. It's the only light in the darkness of a home. But the flame is fading. There's only a faint glow as the wick smolders into nothingness. It will simply fade into darkness. Do you ever feel like that? Everything is dark? Or is there a part of you that still glows? Is there still an ember that yearns for God? That longs for something more? You know you really want to know God? Jesus, God with Us, comes,

softly blowing on that smoldering ember, fanning the flame, reigniting that passion for life, for God, for other people, and for God's world. God will not leave us in darkness.

Read Isaiah 42:3-8. Jesus – God – comes into the grit and grime of the real world not to give us **things** but to be our hope, to meet those deep needs. Jesus begins His ministry quoting Isaiah 61:1-2: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18-19). Notice how similar this is to Isaiah 42.

What those of us who are **poor in spirit** need is not more stuff. What we need is good news: hope to get us through the winter; hope to make it through exams; hope to get through our illness; hope for our family; and (let's name it) hope in the face of our own mortality and death. We can find that hope in Jesus, God with us.

What those of us who feel trapped like **prisoners** need is not things, but hope. We need a new beginning with a new purpose and new meaning. Jesus, God with us, gives us passion and purpose as His people, caring for His creation, being good news in our world.

What those of **who have lost sight of God** need is not another toy, but a new vision of God. A God who changes lives, who loves justice, who cares for the needy, who inspires and gives us a meaningful life of care and compassion. Jesus, God with us, gives us that.

What those of us who are **oppressed by life, guilt, our past**, need is hope. We need mercy. We need forgiveness. We need a new start. Jesus, God with us, gives us that.

"*See, the former things have taken place,*" God says, "*and new things I declare. Before they spring into being I announce them to you*" (42:9). What are these new things?

"*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight*" – Jesus, God with Us, has come into our world. "*I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations*" (42:1). Everything changes. We have hope. It's not the hope of a red VW Bug Tonka care under the Christmas tree. Or the hope of a real 2018 red VW Bug. It's the hope of a real, meaningful, transforming relationship with God through Jesus, in His Spirit. The good news of God's favour is this: that gift HAS come in Jesus.

The gift of God's grace – our hope – is we can know our Saviour, God with Us. This is what Advent is all about. He does understand us, love us (unconditionally), give us wisdom for the BIG decisions in life. He does give us genuine hope and strength in the face of life's BIG challenges. What my heart really longs for this Christmas is to really know Jesus. How about you? Will you let Jesus, God with Us, come into your world?