

*Based on Isaiah 12:2-4. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*

Would you believe me if I told you that, in spite of 2024 being the hottest year on record and the near certainty that climate legislation is going nowhere anytime soon and in fact may even be reversed, the chief climate scientist for the Nature Conservancy *has hope?!?*

Katharine Hayhoe, friend and colleague of our own Than and Mary Anne Hitt, who spoke recently here in Shepherdstown, tells *Mother Jones* magazine exactly that.

Tagged as a relentless optimist by her peers, Hayhoe is well known for insisting the most important thing we can do to address climate change is to talk about it, not in doomsday scenarios but in terms of shared values. That sounds an awful lot like the church! *We need to lean into collaborations and partnerships and solutions, she says, that have multiple wins for both people and the planet, she says.*

But that is not all. Hayhoe, it turns out, with all of her scientific knowledge, has an actual vision of what the end of the story might look like. *If we put it all together, Hayhoe says, all those things we can accomplish with shared values in collaboration and partnership, we have more than enough of what we need.*

WOW! Talk about hope!

This vision of the end of the story, though, does not mean that we avoid the doom and gloom of the present and near-future. *Hope begins with recognizing how bad the situation is, Hayhoe says, because you don't need hope when everything's fine.* I think she has a point. Real hope, constructive hope, Hayhoe concludes, means telling the truth about the many facets of the climate crisis on the one hand, while simultaneously focusing on what real solutions look like on the other hand, all while holding forth a positive vision of what the end of the story can look like.

Sounds like a prophetic witness to me!

A constructive hope of telling the hard truth while focusing on real solutions with a positive vision of the end of the story sounds an awful lot like the sweeping narrative of the Book of Isaiah. The book in its entirety covers a full two hundred years of biblical history, from the dangers unfolding under the veneer of thriving prosperity to literal collapse and exile amid geo-political enemies to a glorious return and rebuilding what matters most.

At least two and possibly three or more prophets in the Isaiah tradition call the people to constructive hope, a la Katherine Hayhoe, through it all. On the one hand this prophetic text juxtaposes harsh criticism of the idolatry and injustice God's people continue to perpetuate. I know, at SPC, we don't like to talk about judgment all that much, but remember the prophetic judgment is always about *justice*, never about *judgmentalism*. The prophet is warning the powers that be over and over and over again that the society they have constructed, with all of its increasing inequality and decreasing commitment to the poor and the lonely and the outcast, cannot help but

collapse of its own weight. All of the biblical prophets do this, Isaiah and Amos and Micah and Hosea. The center simply cannot hold in a society such as this.

At the same time, the prophet offers an equally inverse compassionate call to resilient hope in God's comforting embrace on the other side of devastation. *Comfort, comfort now my people*, the prophet soothes when the consequences of the cultural inequity come to pass. *Water WILL rise - in the wilderness - from the wells of salvation*.

There is even some evidence, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests, of an alternative community committed to these values emerging in the midst of this prophetic juxtaposition. As the broader culture flourishes at the expense of justice, as the broader culture collapses under the weight of its uncaring, as the community slogs through a second slavery in Babylon, this alternative community holds fast to constructive hope. There is some evidence that it is in fact this alternative community, Bruggemann suggests, that keeps the story continuing at all.

None of which is made clear explicitly in chapter twelve, which is our lesson today. All of which is foreshadowed by its vision of the end of the story.

Yes, things are dismal, the prophet admits in these first twelve chapters, which compose a sort of "mini-book" within the larger Isaiah narrative. These first twelve chapters cover perhaps a couple of decades of biblical history: the beginning of the beginning of the end, you might say. In these first twelve chapters, the prophet tells us a thriving, prosperous nation that once had it all is about to crumble. A people who have every reason to trust life will continue its upward trajectory is about to collapse.

And it really is your own darn fault, the prophet laments, throughout these first twelve chapters. The powers that be have been warned over and over again that their insistence on economic privilege and purity of worship at the expense of those who are poor and lonely and outcast will destroy their society. They just have not been able to bring themselves to heed these warnings with competent collective action.

By the time we get to chapter twelve, the prophet knows full well that the warnings will come true, that life will get a whole lot worse for them before it will get better.

*But ...* the prophet does indeed hold out hope that *it WILL get better!* Over the long view, which in this case is something close to two hundred years, it really will get better. There *will* be strength, there *will* be joy, there *will* be water from the wells of salvation! A deeper dependence on the God of liberation will develop. A second Exodus will lead the people out of a second slavery.

It may not sound very hopeful to us to hear that the promised vision takes 200 years to unfold, but have you ever *watched ants rebuild what was broken by a world much bigger than theirs*, as our poet suggests? It takes time, it takes community, it takes resilience, it takes compassion, it takes *the mirror of the water reminding you*

*of your goodness and bringing you home again.* It takes seeing our story as part of a larger story that absolutely includes us but is so much bigger than us.

In that larger story, we are promised that God will work out something new beyond the dismal state we find ourselves in. In that larger story we can expect a miracle of birth and rebirth and coming home again. In that larger story the final word is always thanks and praise: an alleluia mixed with mercy.

Yes, it is true, for many of us  *Holding On to Hope*  in this particular Season of Advent is a thin thread. The times can feel awfully dismal, in our personal lives, in our communal life, in our global life, in our national life. Real hope, constructive hope, in these dismal times, as both the prophet Isaiah and the prophet Katharine Hayhoe insist, does mean telling the truth. And then ... setting aside a moment to listen to the water trickle from the well that arises out of nowhere. And then ... getting right back to the work of the church that has always been the work of the church: feeding the hungry in body and soul, tending the soil of the earth and the spirit, healing the sick in body and mind, and telling the old, old story as if for the very first time.

Beloved friends, the good news for us on this third Sunday of Advent is that even if we do not know the end of the story, the end of the story knows  *us* !

And in that, may we hold on to our Advent hope.