

The World is About to Turn to Hope

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Matthew 3:1–12

We've had a lot of talk about hope this week around Ravensworth during this Advent season—at Bible study, at Thursday breakfast club, and a lot of spaces in between. And I'll be honest, I was feeling quite overwhelmed about the state of the world, not to mention this text from Matthew and John the Baptist's words of judgment.

And then, I decided I was going to try to pay attention and try to find hope and the weirdest thing happened: I started to see hope everywhere.

My inbreaking to this hope-filled week began at the movie theater last weekend.

As the girls, John's mom, and I settled into our seats and John took one for the team and waited in the popcorn line, I looked around the movie theater. I saw little kids everywhere dressed as their favorite character from Frozen II. I saw little Elsas and Annas and Olafs and Kristoffs. They were so excited to finally be seeing what they'd all been waiting for—a sequel to the story about the Norwegian princesses, about ice magic, and caring for each other in community.

Maybe it's because it's Advent, maybe it's because my mind had shifted to hope, maybe it's because it's dark outside earlier, or maybe, and most likely, I was drawn to the quiet, more subtle, moments in the movie.

No spoilers! There's a scene where the younger sister, Princess Anna finds herself in a seemingly impossible situation with grief heavy on her. It's physically weighing her down, she's weeping, and she's not sure how she's going to move forward in any way—physically or emotionally. And then, there's a moment where she looks up through the shadows of where she is and sees a bit of light, showing her the way out and of course, on cue, a song begins and she climbs and sings simultaneously.

I will not sing it for you, but the chorus repeats,

“Just do the next right thing
Take a step, step again
It is all that I can to do
The next right thing
I won't look too far ahead,
It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath
This next step
This next choice is one that I can make
Just to do the next right thing.”

All throughout the movie *Olaf*, the magically made snowman, in case you are not familiar, talks about how water holds memory. Meaning: he's three big snowballs of memory. It was a puzzling line at the beginning, but at the end, it hits you full stop that water holding memory is a sign of deep and abiding hope--- the creative forces of God in the world hold deep memory---when we are grieving, when we are rejoicing, when we are nourishing ourselves, when we are desperately trying to do the next right thing, we are pulling up that memory. Memory holds hope, *Olaf* might say.

After Tuesday morning Bible Study, I went back into the office and an article came across my feed entitled, "The Deep Fear that Makes Us Turn to Mister Rogers," by Shea Tuttle. As a Mister Rogers fan and one who is desperate to see the new movie, of course I clicked on the piece. Tuttle previously wrote a book about Fred Rogers life and life of faith. The article reads,

"For decades, we have recalled Fred whenever something terrible happened in our world, sharing his comforting words and image on social media. Then, in the last couple of years, we've dug a little deeper, with documentary and books (and merch!) galore. This week, the fascination seems to have peaked with the release of a feature film, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Oscar winner Tom Hanks. Why do we keep summoning Mister Rogers? And why is now the time for a feature film about his influence?

"We need him now," people often say to me. "There's no one like him these days," I often hear. "If only he were around..." There's a heavy dose of nostalgia at play here.

But nostalgia, while pleasant, is static. It doesn't heal any ills or bind any wounds. It certainly doesn't build neighborhoods of care, which is the work Fred Rogers was all about. Nostalgia suggests that there was a simpler time, that Mister Rogers was a simple man, that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a simple show where we could find respite from political rancor and weaponized fear—if only we could figure out how to get back *there*. The problem is that the '60s and '70s and '80s and '90s, the decades when Fred was building and broadcasting his *Neighborhood*, were not simple. Neither was he. Neither were we." ¹

Tuttle continues that Mr Rogers didn't preach to us about what to do—because instead of telling us to what to do constantly, he just did it. He modeled it. But our memory tells us that he said all these things---and in reality, he showed us the way and he told us stories about it and we have deeply embodied the memory of him and the way he spoke to the world even in times of deep chaos.

Mr Rogers showed us how to hope.

And if memory holds our hope, and it settles deep in our bones, then hope is deeply settled in the prophets of the bible:

Isaiah was a prophet and Isaiah's world was a mess. Prophets aren't really needed when everything is perfect. I guess that's why we always have prophets because nothing's ever been perfect.

¹ Shea Rogers, "The Deep Fear that Makes us Turn to Mister Rogers," *Greater Good Magazine*. Nov 26, 2019.

Isaiah was working when kings had too much power and too little prowess and he knew that a neighboring empire was going to come and conquer the little place that he called home. It seemed like nothing could be done to control the chaos. And yet, he hoped.

Even knowing that Exile was likely coming, Isaiah drew on the embodied, memory of who God was and this idea of hope.

He wrote the beautiful words we read this morning of a world that could only be envisioned through hope.—

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

Isaiah was calling on the generations before him as he looked forward in hope for someone who again might come and prepare the way for God's people. He was modeling how the people might remember and how they might hope.

Hate to say it, but once the Roman Empire came on the scene in Jerusalem and Galilee, things weren't much better. Prophets were still needed to call the people to hope. And that's when we meet John the Baptist. He's a prophet, just like Isaiah—calling the people to hope, to trust in the power of God.

And Matthew quotes Isaiah—even Matthew was using memory as hope as he wrote,

*This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.” ’*

Why is John out there baptizing in the Jordan River as the Roman Empire is oppressing his people? Why is John preaching as he calls out the religious leaders of the day? Why is he coming out of the river, in his water-soaked tunic and honey-soaked beard to share with the crowd that someone else is coming after him---someone who is more powerful than he is, someone's sandals who were too holy for him to touch?

Because he had hope that these promises from God as the world should be might be realized someday.

He and Jesus knew their world needed hope. John the Baptist was calling the people to look ahead, but living into the deep down hope of who he knew God to be. Surely the memories that his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth believed and sang about rang through his ears.

One thing I know for sure is that I never thought I'd write a sermon that connected Frozen II and Mister Rogers and Isaiah and John the Baptist, but once I started to pay attention—to stay alert as Jesus might say, I saw hope everywhere.

These are all passages—stories—some more sacred than others depending on your canon of choice, where we hear a voice crying out in the wilderness—voices speaking words of hope and showing us how to hope. It looks different in different situations. And I'll be honest, I prefer a Mister Rogers kind of delivery over John the Baptist, but we need the John the Baptists in the world because we might not wake up and pay attention without them.

And when we join in this proclamation of hope in the world and start seeing it everywhere, I get a little dizzy because I feel the earth move under my feet because the world is about to turn!

Hope is what we do. We re-tell these passages because somewhere deep inside we have a memory and have let them grow within us. And we re-tell them together in this space because together we make meaning from them and we hope. It's what we've been doing since the beginning of time. The memory gives us hope.

And we'll keep adding to the places where hope lives because we'll keep turning the world. And as we do, God will show up in new and creative ways, pointing us toward hope and helping us remember it all at the same time.

To quote another princess, Princess Leia, "hope is like the sun, If you only believe in it when you can see it, you'll never make it through the night."

And we know, because in our memory from just two weeks ago, John the Baptist's dad, Zechariah sang a song that said God's sunrise was about to break upon us. Hope is about to break upon us.

And when we look around, we see hope. We might all get a little dizzy because the world is always turning toward that sunrise.

Hope actually, is, all around and it makes the world turn.

Thanks be to God. Amen.