

Brenda Seat: Hope, Call, and the Kingdom of God

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Seekers Church

First Sunday of Advent, December 3, 2000

Brenda Seat

Good morning,

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and, appropriately, our lectionary readings for today talk about hope.

Jeremiah talks about the Hope in the coming of a King from the line of David who will reign justly and with righteousness.

The Psalmist hopes that God is still in control even when all the outward signs are to the contrary.

In the Epistle reading from Thessalonians, we see the early church hoping for the fulfillment of Christ's reign of righteousness as they begin to face persecution for their faith.

And in the Gospel reading from Luke we hear of the signs that will precede the second coming of Christ, giving hope that God's reign will indeed come just like new leaves on a fig tree are a sign that summer is coming.

Hope is powerful. Hope makes us strong when we should be weak, it makes us courageous when we should be cowering, Hope in God somehow makes us blind to the world's reality and opens our eyes to see our situation with a new light. Hope makes us look

beyond ourselves.

The Japanese kanji for Hope looks like this...

Here at the bottom is the symbol for Earth, or ground.

On top of it is the symbol for person ... together it means King ... a person on top of the land.

To the left is the symbol for eyes, wide open

To the right is the symbol for the moon

So all together the symbols for Hope are: A person who stands on top of the land, with eyes wide open gazing up at the moon.

Hope is found outward and upward.

However, what do we look at outward and upward to as our source of Hope?

In all of our readings today there is reference to the coming of a just and righteous kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Is this what we look towards? Is this our source of Hope? Moreover, if so, what is it and how do we know it when we see it?

We catch glimpses of the Kingdom of God every once in awhile. I would like to share one such experience.

In Japan, officially, there is no class system. At the end of WWII, laws abolished all the hierarchy of the feudal system. That meant that families that could trace their lineage back hundreds of years to the samurai could no longer claim special status. These same laws tried to also help people in the lowest caste, the outcasts of the feudal system – the Etta. The Etta were descendants of the people in the feudal system who killed animals, made or worked with leather, buried the dead, and did other things that were considered unclean by Buddhist society. But in spite of the fact that the laws abolished the outward signs of class, family backgrounds and records which can trace lineage back hundreds of years, and

the fact that the Etta have distinctive names that they are not allowed by law to change, prevents change or integration. Even today, a person's family background is verified before a person gets married. The family registry is carefully examined to see that there are no undesirable names listed, making sure that the line has not been tainted. Businesses carefully screen applicants to make sure that they do not hire Etta, because they are afraid that if they did, the other employees would refuse to work with an Etta person, or worst of all that it would offend their customers to be served by an Etta. And so, the Etta still find it difficult to get jobs in industries outside of their traditional trades. They are still kept on the outside.

When we went back to Japan two summers ago, we attended the worship service at the last of the churches that my parents started. As you might expect, the building is very small, and so we all were standing around in the sanctuary, as the Sunday school let out and people were gathering for the service. On this Sunday, Mr. Takahashi was the service leader. Mr. Takahashi's family is a very distinguished one, tracing their lineage back to the samurai. Mr. Takahashi went to the best schools in Nagano, and eventually was hired by the equivalent of AT&T in Japan, a very high honor back in the 1960's. As we gathered in that small little church and began to sit down, I noticed that Mr. Takahashi and the visiting speaker were praying earnestly together, side-by-side, and heads bowed, at the front of the church. I couldn't hear all that was being said, but I heard the visitor pray that his words would be the words that God wanted him to speak, and I heard Mr. Takahashi asking God to be with the speaker, to give him the Word God wanted him to speak to the people who attended church that morning. Nothing that unusual in a Japanese church, but when the speaker began to speak and began to tell his story, I realized that he was Etta.

I knew then that I had caught a glimpse of the Kingdom of God

when I saw this small body of believers inviting an Etta person to speak to their church, risking ostracism by both believers and unbelievers. But more significant to me was that I had seen the descendant of samurai, and the descendant of Etta, praying together, for each other and for the worship service, something that could have only happened in this small little church, and only because in Christ we are all equal before God.

That glimpse is a source of hope for me. If God can accomplish this through people being faithful to God's call then indeed there is hope, and I can believe that the Kingdom of God is coming, has been coming and is still coming even after all this time. And maybe one of our tasks as Christians is to not only to work for the coming of the Kingdom, but also to hold up and acknowledge those places where we see glimpses of the Kingdom of God too, so that we can all see the vision again and not lose Hope.

To look with eyes wide open, outward and upward towards our source of **hope**.

The passage from Luke has been a hard place for me to be this week as I prepared for this sermon. Coming from the background I do, I have always heard these passages being taken very literally. It is scary! But in addition to that, I have always had mixed feeling about just waiting for the coming of Christ to usher in the Kingdom of God all on his own! Where does that leave the church and us, and individual Christians? It seems to me that the little glimpses of the Kingdom of God come about because somebody or a group of somebodies has been faithful to God's call. Moreover, by listening to those stories and catching a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, we begin to see the Hope there is in being faithful to our own call.

In some ways, we have been in Advent for six years! At that time, we began the process of moving from this place, to somewhere yet unknown. We began to hear new calls emerge, and

we struggled to discern where God was calling us to be. As you remember, it was not an easy journey. We had many fits and starts as we searched for new space. Now that we have found our space and we begin to think of ourselves living in that space we are faced with new challenges. I have been noticing, as I am sure you have, the struggles, the confusion, the seeming chaos that has been caused by our moving to Carroll Street. This move is shaking us to our core!

In some ways, it seems like God has reached down and has taken us in her hands and is gently shaking us up before she places us down in our new home.

Because of this move, we have to look at our core documents and come to new and better understandings about who God has called us to be and what it means to us to be "a small part of the body of Christ. Because of this move, we have had to reorganize ourselves, forming groups around all the tasks that need to be accomplished in ways that we have never tried before. Now those groups are taking the initiative and the responsibility for all that needs to be done in order to make this move possible. We, as a church and as individuals, have taken on enormous financial responsibilities so that we can create a space that will work for all the calls that we carry now and what we think will emerge in the future. Because of this move, we are beginning to think of ways to reach out to a neighborhood, from a place that we will own and call home, in ways that we have never done before. This move has shaken us loose. ... maybe not in an apocalyptic sense like Luke describes, but we are going through an enormous amount of change as we bring to birth something new. Like trees sprouting new leaves, after a hard winter, we are beginning to see new growth in Seekers in ways that we have never seen it before. And as we faithfully follow God's leading in this new call, we believe that we will be creating new glimpses of the Kingdom of God which will offer Hope to all who see them.

And what about our growth as individuals? I think it is clear

to all of us that there is something transforming in being a part of this community, this part of the Body of Christ. Our emphasis on call, commitment, accountability, disciplines and servant leadership, encourage all of us to take seriously Christ's call on our lives. Sometimes that is not an easy path. As you know, I have struggled with this too ... at one point [in a sermon](#), I named my struggle as "being call-less in a community where call is everything."

As I think back on my journey around Call, I am struck by the fact that it was the discomfort of being here at Seekers, the feeling that things were not right, the disease that motivated me towards something new. At first it was very clear to me what was wrong, and I have recently reread some of my spiritual reports (my poor spiritual director!) in which I was quite articulate in naming all the things that were wrong with the Sunday School, and what Seekers was doing wrong and how it was failing to provide me with what I needed spiritually. But as time went on and things at Seekers and with the Sunday School did not change the way I wanted them to, and Marian and Lauren, when offered a choice to go to a church which seemed to provide solid Christian teaching with a much better youth program with more kids and more activities, refused to go, I began to have to confront the fact that maybe it wasn't Seekers that was out of sync, but **me**! I began to realize that all my discomfort, dissatisfaction, and feeling alienated from God was not so much because of a lack in what Seekers was offering but, rather because I was alienated from God and therefore couldn't fully appreciate what was being offered, and that I was not really working on my spiritual life, but just drifting along, expecting everything to be fed to me without having to do my own work. That realization was quite humbling. I began to make some changes.

Since that time, I have been trying to listen to what new call would emerge for me. However, somehow the children of this community, and their needs, kept intruding on all my attempts

to allow something else to emerge. Everywhere I turned, it seemed that I was getting involved in some activity that revolved around the children of this community. I will just share one example, I took the course taught by Cynthia and Peter on Servant Leadership, (that seems pretty safe, right?) and one of our assignments was to analyze the leadership structure of some aspect of Seekers, and what did I choose? I chose Seekers' Ministry to Children. I told myself I was doing it because we needed to call forth new leadership in this area. As I worked on the assignment, drawing a chart showing the interrelationships between all the various things that we do to be inclusive of children and to provide ways to support their spiritual development, I could see the places of need, where we needed more support and more leadership, and those needs called out to me.

More recently, Trish [in her sermon in September](#) talked about the need for a place where all of our community energy around kids could have a place to be heard, nurtured and supported, and again, something called to me.

Over the last few months, my mission group, Journeying with Children, began to take another look at their call. From our discussions, it has become clear that some of us were feeling something new emerging. For some of us the need for a central place where the community energy for our children would reside, including the Sunday school, is something that feels like call. For others it does not seem like call, and for them new calls are either emerging or need to be discerned. As it became clear that we were in divergent places we began a discernment process, which has led our group to believe that it is time for us to let the old die, and to begin again with a new vision and to issue a new call.

Things are shaking loose... In addition, something new is beginning to emerge for me around call...

Advent looks towards the birth of the one who taught us what

the Kingdom of God was like, and with Hope, looking with eyes wide open, we follow in his footsteps, slowly, we and this small body of Christ, and in many bodies like this all over the world, we are changing, and being changed, until we catch glimpses of what Jesus was talking about – the Kingdom of God.

Show me your ways, O Lord, says the psalmist; Teach me your paths; Guide me in your truth and teach me, For you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

Amen!