

We start Advent today, meaning the “coming” of our Savior, and we focus on the theme of Hope. It is natural to think about hope by thinking about how badly we need it! Between world crises, our nations’ polarization, Covid and other illnesses, it’s sometimes easier to be in despair and feel hopeless!

So this morning, I’d like to focus on two “stories” about Hope, Hope in the face of great challenge or obstacles. Stories have always been a principal way to illustrate real faith, as moderator Bill Lincoln demonstrated for us so well in his sermon-stories. My first story is an Alaskan legend of survival of “Two Old Women” who were left to die, as was sometimes the custom, in some nomadic tribes during severe winter famines. They were deemed an excessive burden, to carry along and feed, perhaps depriving children and young adults of food. Spoiler alert! ... though I’m sure you can guess that it’s a story of courage AND SURVIVAL; they DO survive the winter, finding food and shelter!

So the two women were 75 and 80 years old, abandoned by their starving tribe, wondering if they could possibly find food and warmth. The author writes: *As the cold air smothered the campfire the one named “Star,” the 75 year old, came alive with a greater fire within her almost as if her spirit had absorbed the energy from the glowing embers of the campfire.* She said, *They think we are old and useless. If we are going to die, my friend, let us die trying, not sitting.* “Let us die trying.” Star gets the hatchet that her grandson gave her, remembering that she too had learned to hunt in her younger years, and she was able to kill a squirrel by judging the speed it ran up a tree as she raised her arm to throw the hatchet! They made squirrel stew and savored the broth for many days. The two women also made nooses to catch rabbits made nets to catch muskrats coming out from

tunnels under frozen lakes. When they traveled, they made snow shoes out of flexible willow branches, and dug pits in the deep snow in which to sleep at night. A story of incredible determination and survival!

A good short read, *Two Old Women*, and Sue H. has several extra copies I'm sure, if they did not all get sent to Kenya! But to make a long story short, the tribe catches up with them the following winter, still "half starved" and weak, to find that the women had made a great camp site next to a river with plenty of fish, and the two women actually had stores of EXTRA FOOD! The inspiring ending tells of forgiveness and reconciliation, and says: *Relations became better between the people and the two women. The people had thought themselves to be strong, yet they had been weak. And the two old ones who they thought to be useless had proven themselves to be strong, so an unspoken understanding existed between them. The people found themselves seeking out the company of the "two old women" for advice, and to learn new things.*

My second story of hope and courage with aging is about my soul friend, Ken Medema. To be very brief, he was born on December 7, 1943, so he will turn 78 very soon. He was born blind, or I suppose you might say, 95% blind, as he says he can see some shadows, and can tell light from dark. Naturally he had to deal with many limitations and obstacles in life, including feeling left out or excluded from things his sighted friends could do, but his parents always encouraged him to TRY everything. I learned recently that he learned to waterski in his youth, and could even ride a bike next to his wife, perhaps listening to her voice or following her shadow. As you know, he's had an amazing career as a traveling musician, while supporting an office staff of

about 5 people. And speaking of determination and courage, we know that he suffered a ruptured heart artery in mid October, had a life-saving operation, and was back on the road giving concerts again in a month later! I once asked his agent Beverly when he might retire, and she thought he'd travel and sing until he is no longer is able; well that time has not come yet, such is his passion for making healing music with Christ's overcoming spirit.

On his most recent album, he sings and reflects about *aging* in a song entitled Ocean Beach. Yes, I recently ordered and learned the song. Here are some key lyrics ... how as a child he would "*leap into the whitecaps,*" ... that now he is "*older and cautious,*" but "*still there are beaches and whitecaps and journeys for these, my best days! This is my choice: I want to leap into this strange new day! To love and to learn what I could not know yesterday!*"

He says: *I will run with the stranger, and I'll walk with a friend. I will dance till I stumble, and I'll get up again.* (Imagine how many times in his life he must have stumbled; it happened before my very eyes; we were recording one day and he tripped over some microphone wire, landed on the floor, but he just continued talking as he sat there, soon getting back up.) The lyrics continue: *I will not run for shelter when the path is unknown, for I am surrounded by friends and companions, I am not alone!* Like the two old women, he can greet each new day knowing he has support in friends or companions.

One last thing, his chant with a driving beat: *I want to love the night, I want to seize the day, I want to run the race, don't want to dream my life away!* We probably know the saying Carpe Diem (Seize the day!), and we remember scripture lessons about "running the race." Yet in his hard-won wisdom, Ken speaks of

*loving the night!* This might refer to the good rest that we need to face life's challenges. We remember that the Bible says God gives rest and sleep to his beloved. OR... "Loving the night" might also refer to dark fearful times, or what Carl Jung calls the "Shadow" parts of our being, the weak, or difficult-to-face parts of ourselves. Loving the night could refer to accepting our tears... tears that last for the night, as scriptures say. People who don't accept the shadow parts of themselves often project and blame them onto others. We've got to love the night, make friends with our shadows, if we are to be able to seize the day. Here's Ken's song of courage with aging, called Ocean Beach...

I love the poetry of Isaiah Chapter 40 (They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength), but recognizes that we may not "*fly like eagles*" or "*run and not be weary,*" but we might just "*walk and not faint.*" ... renewed strength might just take one step at a time. The two old women needed to take one step of survival at a time, Ken developed a nationwide music ministry one concert at a time, Belleville continues with strong faith into the future one step at a time. Of course our central story of Hope as Courage is the life of Jesus of Nazareth himself: Jesus as Master Teacher, as Compassionate Healer, as the Messiah (Christ or Anointed One), as Emmanuel (God-With-Us), as Risen Christ (Victorious One). In Christ's Spirit, we know we are all beloved children of God, that we are not alone, but have friends and companions, who walk with us, step by step, as a community in Christ's love Amen. Let's pray...