

HOPE... We start every Advent with the theme of Hope. The world is full of darkness, in the time before Christ, and now. We don't need to elaborate much, since the world news is full of tragedy, and our personal lives have plenty of strained relationships.

So we all seek reasons to have Hope! ... I may be the one called to preach on the theme, but I also begin by seeking words of hope myself, of course! The reading from the prophet Isaiah is a very hopeful reading, but we are clear that it is a Vision, and it is full of poetic metaphor! We will beat our swords into plowshares or plow "blades" and our spears into pruning tools. (Our weapons of war will be turned into tools of gardening!) The prophet's words are an *ideal* vision, something we won't realize in any complete way in this lifetime.

So what about the New Testament reading? Paul's letter to the Romans emphasizes OUR part in having lives of hope, that he calls salvation. Salvation, personal or societal, can take work and change on our part. Paul tells the Roman church to "get rid of the actions that belong to darkness (put aside sinful or harmful things) and put on the weapons of light!" Continuing the metaphor, Paul says that we should "dress ourselves" with the Lord Jesus Christ. Hope is not just something God gives to us; we must intentionally wear it, "clothe" ourselves with hope!

Naturally one way to put on hope, is to read words of hope, not only in the Bible, but in commentaries on Holy scripture also! One commentator I love to read is Rabbi Harold Kushner, and I'm currently reading his book on Psalm 23. Wise interpretations! -First of all, let me remind us that Kushner became known by his most famous book "When bad things happen to good people."

(I'm not sure when he had time to write books, for he was a Rabbi of a large congregation in Natick for many years.)

Kushner emphasizes the need in this world for good, caring relationships... especially important in times of loss or misfortune. Rabbi Kushner gives an example from his own life, since he lost a child to a rare rapid-aging disease: His son lived to only age 14. In Kushner's own words: *After our son's death, my wife and I joined a support group for bereaved parents, called Compassionate Friends. It was a lifeline for us when we needed it, and we remain grateful for its help. We would meet once a month and go around the table, each family recounting the story of their loss of a child. We discovered how important it was to be with people who understood our emotional need to tell the story over and over again, when some friends were telling us "get over it and get on with your life." We discovered how helpful we could be to other parents by telling them that we had the same fantasies and guilt feelings that they did...*

A good example of a grief support group! None of us is beyond the need for support in times of loss, tears, sadness. For some, like the Kushners, it may be a support group for a specific kind of loss, as in the loss of a child. For others, trusted friends may be willing to hear sad feelings for a good while, to hear cathartic venting as needed. We all need to have friends with whom we can be honest. This takes trust, and it involves vulnerability, since the honesty can be about feeling low and weak, a vulnerable confession to make!

Trusting relationships, that involve honesty and vulnerability, are the key to hope and healing! Rabbi Kushner writes beautifully about this: *To love someone is to make yourself vulnerable. It means taking off the armor you wear to protect yourself against*

*the forces in the world that would hurt you. To love someone is to say to that person, being close to you is so important to me that I will give you the power to hurt me, because I trust you not to use that power. Sigmund Freud was wrong when he said that people choose between pleasure and pain. The real choice is between inviting both pleasure and pain into our lives, or else opting for a life of numbness, a life without feeling, so that life will never hurt us.* In a trusting friendship, we open up our heart; In an intimate relationship, we speak of giving our heart away. These are vulnerable acts, for we are taking off protective armor, and people can take advantage of our exposing a need or a sad or weak feeling. But such honesty and vulnerability is exactly what we need to begin healing, to find new hope in goodness, friendships, community.

Naturally, Kushner also speaks of leaning on GOD... He said it succinctly in the introduction to his book *The Lord is My Shepherd* (Ps. 23): *The impetus for this book came in the wake of the terrible events of Sept. 11, 2001. Many asked, "How could God let this happen?" I found myself responding, "God's promise was never that life would be fair. God's promise was that when we had to confront the unfairness of life, we would not have to do it alone, for He would be with us."*

Jews have to use many metaphors for God, and Kushner comes up with a magnificent one: *God is like the "magnetic force" that guides people through the dark night and brings them into a brighter world.* While I love many metaphors for God, as a Christian, I find much comfort non-metaphorical words of Jesus, that He himself is with us as Divine Presence. "Emmanuel," another name we use for Jesus, literally means God-with-us, and

for Christians, we point to the promise of Holy Spirit, not only as God-with-us, but as God-*within*-us!

Let me share one more story from Rabbi Kushner about the importance of relationships to maintain hope in life, to know that we are not alone in this world. *After my evening lecture, a woman came up to me and shared a story. She told me how she was on her way out of the office for a coffee break when she saw a coworker who she knew, casually sitting and looking out of the window. She said to her, "I'm going for coffee, would you like to come along?" The woman thought for a moment and said "sure." Over coffee, the coworker said "I have to tell you what your invitation has meant to me. Two days ago, my longtime boyfriend left me, telling me on the way out all the things that were wrong with me. I was devastated. I was sure no one would ever love me again. When you saw me staring out the window a few minutes ago, I was trying to get up the courage to open it and jump out, taking my life because I felt so alone. Your invitation to join you for coffee called me back to life, and said to me that there were still people in the world who cared about me. I don't know how to thank you."*

In conclusion, there are very dark times in life, and the beginning of hope is relationship, knowing that we are not alone, and we can get through such times with care and support from others. This usually involves trust, trusting that someone can hear our honest feelings, feelings of sadness or pain, without walking away or just trying to give a simple solution. We can heal and can live in hope, with loving, caring relationships. Amen.