Practicing Hope One Step at a Time

About once a week I hear myself say to someone, “It’s a tunnel, not a cave.” I really believe that, though it is somehow ironic that the closer we get to the end of the tunnel, the more it feels like a cave. Welcome to Advent.

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace in the name of Jesus who is the light of the world. Or to put it metaphorically, Dear winter drivers, as you negotiate the hazards of the road in this dark season, I bid you the grace of steady taillights to follow. Amen.

Isaiah steers our Advent between two extremes: One is thinking we’ve already arrived. We have faith, the kingdom is ours. God is in God’s heaven and all is right with the world.

The second is despairing of every seeing the goodness, the shalom, peace and justice of God. Things are so bad this good could somehow never happen.

Between these extremes, Isaiah brings the language of promise and path. The promise is that God will establish God’s house. The mountain of God will be lifted up and people will flock to it, exile and end of semester notwithstanding.

And the second promise is that God will teach people to walk in God’s paths, weapons of war will be turned to garden tools and people will walk in light. Isaiah starts with paths, but he’s not through prophesying until he envisions highways in chapter 35. . . . and by chapter 40 he pulls out bulldozers to exalt every valley and lay low every mountain, make the rough places plain and reveal the glory of God.

Which is to say Isaiah knows about obstacles. . . and still light proceeds and we are bid to follow—to follow the light of God to life and peace.

Against presumption, Isaiah is saying we’ve got a long ways to. Lots of people to learn lots about peace. Lots of swords and spears to become plows, lots of bombs and battle gear to be transformed to pruning shears. Isaiah spoke more than 2 ½ millennia ago; it’s a long path before people cease to learn war anymore.

Against the challenge of despair, comes the prophetic gift of promise. God will come. God will teach peace and people will learn; God is light and people will walk in this path. I confess I read this chapter in preparation for this sermon within minutes of having read the report of Obama’s commission to address
the deficit. . .if you’ve read it you know we have a long ways to go. I was, I still could, feel despair. And at that, reducing the deficit will not bring peace, it’s merely to prevent calamity. It was gift to be slapped by this passage. Read chapter one and you know that Isaiah knows all about injustice, economic and otherwise. Isaiah knows about patterns that will not change, politics that are gridlocked, spirituality that deteriorates to self interest. And still Isaiah believes and speaks an Advent word: God is coming. God is faithful. God is light and by the power of God we will learn to walk in paths of light. If you find yourself discouraged by the news, Kathleen Norris asserts that to read the prophets IS to pay attention to what’s going on.

Anna Carter Florence says do not speak a text until it has put you to death. . . and then tell what dies and what rises. The arrogant presumption of despair died in me at the hands of this text; and the gift of another step rose up. The promise makes a path with light to follow. Who am I to say we’ll never see peace? The poetry of the prophets rattles our certainty whether it is presumption or despair.

Advent throws light against the darkness, a path into a cave in the courageous hope that it is, after all, a tunnel.

It seemed too odd to talk of paths and following and to dedicate a processional banner without actually walking it. St. Augustine said liturgy is visible words. We get to see and practice the path. . . and taking steps. A processional shows us that faith is a walk and the cross leads us in to worship to hear and receive the promise of God. A recessional shows us that the cross leads us back out into the world. . . where crucifixions still happen and where God calls us to engage them with promise that light will prevail; that violence will give way to gardening. It’s practice in taking a step—out of presumption, beyond despair and into God’s future.

We will always be led by the cross of Jesus that bears every darkness. Today we celebrate that we are also led by a new banner. The vocation of artists is also to make promise visible, to serve the walk of faith by helping us see.

Brady Holm gives new and wonderful visual interpretation to Augustana’s colors. He did his research and learned that Scandinavian countries could often not afford expensive purple dyes, so they used blue in Advent, the color of the sky and a sign of hope. In our sesquicentennial, Brady both claims this deep Scandinavian heritage and puts it in front of us in the service of hope. The Gold is at the center as a reminder of Easter. Brady says, “I see this banner as a reminder to keep centered, and central to our faith is the Easter celebration, which is signified by the gold color in the banner. It is interwoven with the blues to represent the hope we find in the death and resurrection of Jesus.”

Brady writes, “As it processes at the beginning of a new academic year, my vision is that the banner would instill in our students, faculty and staff, hope for the things to come with a new year. . . the design took on an upward movement. In the final design the vertical bars move upwards from the outside to the center, causing one’s eyes to rise to the center.”
Stay centered in hope, in the light of resurrection, in the promise of God that moves us forward toward Christ’s coming. As it goes with art, others see other things. Someone described the strands as the liberal arts and our hope that all the strands unite in light. I frankly see a sunrise. . . .which the ancient church also claimed as gift of resurrection and promise of the sureness of God’s hope.

We will carry it in front of us—at fall convocation and again at baccalaureate, to practice being led by hope. Martha Stortz, a teacher at Augsburg College, asserts that the first and last words of discipleship are follow. The first and last thing Jesus said to the disciples is “follow me.” We remember that not to be followers instead of leaders, but to be disciples instead of saviors. We do not create the light.

The light goes before us, and it promises that life is a tunnel not a cave. This light is the power of a next step. We give thanks for artists you help us see. . . and the Spirit of God that calls us to follow. Amen.