The Roots of Hope

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Romans 15:4-6, 13

On occasion, I will see a movie not because it is on the top of my list of movies I wish to see, but simply because I am curious to know what all the fuss is about. With the huge box office success of the recently released second in the series of Hunger Games, I decided maybe it was time to see the one that came out last year. For those whose curiosity is yet to be peeked, let me give you a very brief summary of the film. With echoes of the Roman Empire, the movie takes as its setting a future where a ruling elite has taken charge after years of conflict. The ruling elite create a coliseum like situation where specifically selected people must fight to the death, leaving only one victor, who then is expected to become an ambassador for those in charge. The people who do battle are young people, chosen from 12 designated districts, where the majority of residents are forced to live in poverty, not unlike the districts of South Africa during the time of apartheid.

The movie begins with the main character, Katniss Everdeen, voluntarily taking her younger sister's place in the brutal televised event called the Hunger Games. That is about as much of the movie as I will tell you. But, there is one scene that is particularly relevant for our Scripture this morning. In this scene the dictatorial President of the country engages in a conversation with his top assistant. [President Snow](http://m.imdb.com/name/nm0000661) asks his assistant, “why do you think we have a winner”? To which, his assistant responds, “What do you mean?” “I mean,” answers the President, “why do we have a winner? I mean, if we just wanted to intimidate the districts, why not round up twenty-four at random and execute them all at once? It would be a lot faster”. Seneca just stares, confused and so the President answers his own question, “Hope”. Still confused, his assistant replies, “Hope?” “Hope”, says the President, “It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. Spark is fine, as long as it's contained.  So...? asks his assistant.  “So, contain it”, replies the President.

Among the most well known sayings of Carl Marx is the quote in which he says, ‘religion is the opium of the people.” Marx essentially means religion offering a little bit of hope does exactly what President Snow expects it will do, it inoculates the people from addressing the underlying issues that keep them in a perpetual state of oppression.

But, in our text today, the prophet Isaiah is not offering a little bit of hope that enables one to accept the unacceptable, tolerate the intolerable, live with the unlivable. On the contrary Isaiah puts forth precisely the type of hope that President Snow finds dangerous.

Isaiah offers the people a big picture, generous hope captured in a vision of a transformed world. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them….They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”. It is this same big picture, world transforming hope about which the Apostle Paul speaks when he says, “may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”.

The people to whom the prophet Isaiah and Paul speak have every reason to give up or at best take whatever comfort they might find in a little bit of hope. The people of Isaiah’s day know the power, the control, the domination of the Assyrian Empire. Paul and the people of his day face the same realities with the Roman Empire. Extreme poverty and social inequity are considered normal or at the very least part of the price that must be paid for this system of domination to work. The Hunger Games captures the brutality and violence often relied upon in order for one group to maintain its privilege and power over another group. The question the people face is where do you find hope, when there is no practical reason for hope? Where do you find hope when all the evidence suggests nothing in your life, nothing in your world will ever change? Where do you find hope when you feel powerless and unable to change or be in charge of your own future?

If the people of Isaiah’s day and Paul’s day are anything like most of us, they look for hope in the things they can see. If you were to ask what makes me hopeful about my son and my daughter, I would point to concrete things in their lives that are positive. My son is doing well in school and so I am hopeful. My daughter is having a good year with AmeriCorps and so I am hopeful. If Americans are asked whether they feel hopeful about the future, they generally are thinking in economic terms and how secure we feel about our income. If the economy starts to slow, if the job market tightens we feel less hopeful. If the economy improves, jobs become more available, we feel more hopeful. If people are asked about whether they feel hopeful about peace between Israel and Palestinians, peace in Afghanistan, peace with Iran, or peace in the all too many conflict ridden places in our world, we commonly look to the current political climate as a basis for concluding there is reason for hope or little reason for hope. Whether it is our personal lives or how we feel about the challenges faced by our nation or by the world, we commonly find our reason for hope in the things that we can see, those places where we have concrete evidence that the future may be a little brighter than it is at the moment.

Yet the big picture, world transforming, life transforming hope of the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul has nothing to do with the above ground hope, which is visible to the naked eye. For Isaiah and Paul to limit one’s hope to what we can see is to be mollified by the little hope that President Snow of the Hunger Games says, is just fine, because it keeps us passive and accepting of the unacceptable and tolerating the intolerable. Isaiah and Paul know what we too often forget, hope that transform, hope that is life change and world changing is hope that has roots. “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,” says Isaiah, “and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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”. The roots of our hope are not dependent on what is happening above ground in the world that we can see, in the concrete evidence of what we are told.

These roots of hope are established in the story of faith found in Scripture, with people who have known the liberating power of God leading us out of captivity into a land of freedom, a God who makes a straight highway in the wilderness for the exiles to return home, who calms the troubled waters when we are afraid, a God who heals the sick of heart and body, who brings life out of death. These roots are established in a people who know we are meant to live in community and it is in community, in the presence of God’s spirit at work among us, that the hope of God’s transforming power is at work. It is out of these below ground roots that little branches emerge, in out of the way places, in small neighborhood churches, carrying with them the hope that God is at work in the small things we do, leading us into a peace and harmony and wholeness that we yet are unable to see.

In her book Scarred by Stuggle Transformed by Hope, Sister Joan Chittister reminds us that struggle and hard times come to everyone sooner or later, no one is immune. All of us encounter those Hunger Game times when it looks like the only hope available is the little hope that makes it possible to accept the unacceptable. But rather than give into the ultimate powerlessness of our above ground hopes, Chittister redirects us to hope with roots. Throughout her book Chittister pairs a struggle that anyone of us might encounter with a gift that comes through the process found in the struggle. The struggle of change is paired with the gift of conversion, the struggle of isolation is paired with the gift of independence, the struggle of fear is paired with the gift of courage, the struggle of exhaustion is paired with the gift of endurance.

Chittister’s hope is the big picture hope of Isaiah and of Paul firmly established in the deep roots of our faith, the deep roots of community, the deep roots of knowing even the small things, the inconsequential branch that we barely notice can become part of God’s transforming presence in our lives and in our world.

For 27 years Nelson Mandela sat in a prison, isolated on an Island, a small branch that looked like it had no future, and yet he emerged with a vision in his heart for a nation and a world that is able to live in peace, harmony and justice. 2,000 years ago, the birth of a child we soon celebrate, was an inconsequential event in an out of the way place, a small branch on the trunk of a tree, that most folks thought was dead and all used up. That trunk has roots. They are the very same roots that continue giving us hope, with transforming power for the struggles and the challenges we face today.

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who look at the challenges of their current situation and see no practical reason for hope. They are surrounded and threatened by powers that are much greater than their own. Isaiah, nonetheless, offers a vision for a transformed word, insisting that the roots of their hope run deep. Later Christians would see in the words of Isaiah a way to understand who Jesus is and the Good News of a changed world that he proclaims.*

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

**Romans 15:4-6, 13**

*Although the Apostle Paul was frequently in conflict with leaders of the Synagogue, he continued to see his Jewish roots as central to the message of hope he encounters in Christ. No matter how difficult or challenging times become, Paul sees reason to rejoice, because the hope he knows is a gift of God’s spirit, and is never limited by the realities of the day.*

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.