

**Active Hope ...**

**first Sunday of Advent/2019**

**Hands up if you have ever felt anxious or worried. Yup that's everybody.**

**Hands up if you have ever felt hopeless about seeing change in a relationship that you really care about. Okay that's almost everybody again.**

**Hands up if you have ever felt fear.**

**Thankyou.**

**Let us pray. Please follow my arms and repeat my words after me.**

Holy One....reach up and out  
May your Hope.....widen arms  
Encircle me .... circle both arms from one side over the head to the other side  
May your Hope ..... widen arms  
Grow within me....hands on heart  
May your Hope .... widen arms  
Reach beyond me.... stretch arms in front away from body  
AMen ..... head down, hands at prayer

Many things in my life have lead to moments when I have felt anxious or worried - mostly those moments have passed by with a change of activity or sometimes - with just having enough time to rationally think through what it is I was worried about and realize that I can either do something about it or not.

Now I don't have a sleep problem like some folks do but - if I have had time late in the evening to dwell upon some news or something of concern - for instance how one of my kids might be doing - or what's going to happen in the future - or what will happen when whole ecosystems collapse - my anxiety levels skyrocket and fear takes over my emotional state. I'm a mess. I become paralyzed and I not only won't be able to get to sleep - I feel stuck on a reel of worry messages that go round and round in my head. I feel like I am helpless to change anything or anyone and I feel hopeless.

Does something like this ever happen to you?

Because sleep is essential - to my overall well being I have to figure out how to break the repeating message loop - I find that if I first acknowledge to myself that I am starting to get overly anxious and I need to get some sleep and that worrying probably won't do me or anyone else any good that is a first step. After that happens - I usually have to come up with an intentional mind activity to help 'slow the reel down and then change tracks completely' - I find focusing on my breathing helps - some people count sheep — sometimes repeating the words of a prayer or poem that I know helps too. Not immediately but after many repetitions and intentionally focusing on each word and breath the anxiety and the worry dissipate.

After a good sleep I awake, my anxiety is gone and 'hope' is there again - filling the day before me with possibility. I am no longer alone with just myself - I can find something that I am grateful for outside myself like the sun - the rain - a bird - my husband - my beautiful children - my grandson — life. Finding things that I am grateful for always starts me going and soon I am thinking about how fortunate I am to have health or friends or a house to live in .....the list goes on. Being grateful definitely changes my mindset.

I know that some worry and anxiety comes from much bigger issues like loss of a loved one, dealing with illness, or loss of a job.

But let me continue....

I have spent most of my life in a church community so I guess I don't know what it is like to not be in one. I am - and you are - the rare exceptions in our society these days. We are in a community of sorts here when we gather. You may feel like you are just barely part of this church - or you've got both feet firmly planted here. Maybe you aren't sure if you want to be part of this community - maybe you are new here.

For the most part I have felt at home in the United Church - I've been challenged by - guided by and accepted into this community.

It is here that I have

- listened to wisdom and gospel stories over and over

It is here that I have

- worked with others side by side in the kitchen.
- where I enjoy soup socials and eating together

here where I

- Talked about what god means to me,

It is here that I have

- stood up for clean water, or written letters demanding freedom for prisoners of conscious,

It is with you that I have

- walked in the pride parade for gender rights

I feel that there are others around me that care, that share a common vision for a world where justice and right relations are our guiding lights. Where love and forgiveness flow freely. I feel like the divine mystery that I call god is visible in communities like ours and even though I experience the frustrations of community too I can feel hopeful about the good in people and the love that gets shared. I find hope here and for that I am grateful.

But what about out there in the REAL WORLD. The world where millions of people are refugees - the real world of military coups - of corruption - of poverty - of growing facism - of climate change and science reports that give us 11 years to change everything. I can't take it!!! I am anxious all over again.

Breathe.

There are things around us all the time that are like anchors for us when we find ourselves out to sea and lost. Anchors of hope. For me one of those anchors is knowing that the the world doesn't have to be this way, it's a matter of choices.

I have a vision of the world that calls to me, that includes all people, that includes all living things. It is beautiful and everyone deserves it. I have learned this from the teachings of Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Jean Vanier and Chief Dan George. These inspirational leaders took inspiration from leaders and teachers who came before them.

Isaiah was no doubt one of them that inspired their actions.

Isaiah lived to a ripe old age in 8th century BC. He lived through the reign of four Kings, who obviously didn't live as long he did.

Isaiah must have begun his career as a prophet early - and as prophets do he had a vision of his world that he said came from God - he was a religious Jew and lived in the Kingdom of Judah at a time when all hell was breaking loose on the people and lands around him. Warring tribes - gluttony - corruption - the lands lay desolate, and as he says in Chapter 1 - "there is blood on your hands" - speaking to 'the people'. I am not sure how he conveyed his messages to the people but it must have been at gatherings on the roadsides or in the temple as there was no facebook - internet - radio or even newspapers.

Prophets aren't just about doom and gloom though and as we see in Isaiah 2:1-5 - Isaiah is passing on a message about how the world he lived in could have been different. 'they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. This is a problematic message today - with corporations and profiteers making lots of money keeping the war machines going! It was no doubt a problem message back in Isaiah's day too! Prophets have never been popular and they usually spoken out from the margins of society and against 'the status quo'.

Greta Thunberg has been called both a prophetic voice about the climate emergency we find our world in right now and by some folks on the christian republican right - a false prophet. Which is it? What do you think, do you believe the science?

Just like in the times of old testament prophets like Isaiah who were telling their people to get back on track and had to do so against criticism from the church and leaders of their day - Greta - and all the other young climate strike leaders around the world are up against the establishment of today. The establishment message is that 'we don't need to worry - we can't upset the economy and nothing needs to change that quickly' - 'we know what we are doing!'

Now I know that we can't change everything overnight but I want to change everything as soon as possible! I want to cling - no - I want to proudly hold up a message that comes not only from my Christian world view but from other religions and prophets around us that say God's world is one of love - of justice and peace - of equality and freedom - of right relationships - of clean water - of food security and of healthy ecosystems that sustain life for all living things on this planet we call home.

My Hope is not tied up in magical thinking or pollyanna optimism - my hope, and I hope your hope, is a practice. It is like mindfulness practice, tai chi or yoga - learning carpentry or gardening - it is something we do rather than just have. It is a process or a practice that we can apply to any situation. It is about taking a clear view of reality - identifying the direction we want it to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed and finally it is up to us - to take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

This is ACTIVE HOPE. We can use it when we feel hopeless. It is about intentions and vision. It is not about weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, but by taking steps forward - we become the hope. This is ACTIVE HOPE and I hope that this will be part of your journey this Advent.