

ADVENT FOUR, YEAR C, DECEMBER 22, 2024

In 2008 the first book of the trilogy known as “The Hunger Games” was published. It was then made into three movies with the first one released in 2012. The premise of the books is about a dystopian futuristic country called Panem that consists of twelve districts ruled by the Capitol. Originally there were 13 districts but it was destroyed when they incited a rebellion against the Capitol. The Capitol embodies oppression and thrives on decadence and being lavishly rich and technologically advanced. But the districts toil in deprivation and in varying states of poverty.

For sport one boy and one girl from each of the twelve remaining districts, between the ages of 12 and 18, are selected by lottery to compete in an annual pageant called the Hunger Games. The Games are a televised event in which the participants, called “tributes”, are forced to fight to the death in a dangerous public arena. Think the Roman Colosseum. The lone victor and their home district are then rewarded with food, supplies, and riches. The purpose of the Hunger Games is to provide entertainment for the Capitol and to remind the districts of the Capitol’s power and its ability to make life worse for them if needed.

In a scene in the movie, President Snow, the dictator of Panem, is walking in his rose garden with the chief “game maker,” Seneca Crane. Crane is the man responsible for creating the Hunger Games and for upholding the winner of the Hunger Games as a brave, strong hero that represents the spirit of Panem.

President Snow asks Seneca Crane why the games must have a winner. If the Capitol simply wanted to show its power and to instill fear and control, he says, why not simply execute people? Why the games? Why a winner? Seneca Crane does not understand. He stares back, confused.

President Snow says simply. “Hope.” “Hope is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained.”

A little hope, says Snow, would allow the games to entertain the people and would allow them to have a hero to root for, while also keeping the Capitol firmly in control. A lot of hope would topple Snow’s oppressive regime entirely. The books and movies are about that spark of hope not being contained.

You see, hope is more than mere optimism. A lot of hope can shake the foundations of everything that weighs us down. A lot of hope can change the course of history.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with optimism. Optimism hopes for good fortune, for fun with friends and family during the holidays, for a blessed and happy new year, and for love and warmth to surround us. There is nothing wrong with a little optimistic cheer.

But if you have experienced the depths of despair, if you have seen the pain that exists in the world, you know that optimism is not enough on its own. It is too difficult to sustain. The world is too broken, too violent, and too divided, and we alone cannot fix it. Our one spark of hope is that God has spoken and told us that all things from our personal struggles to the weight of the world’s pain, shall be made right. That hope is why Mary sings.

Today, the Gospel story invites us, like Mary, to seek out others in order to find our song of hope. It wasn't until Mary was with Elizabeth in the Judean hills that her hope burst into song. And maybe, whether we know it or not, that's what we've done today, too. We have gathered together so that we, too, can sing songs of hope.

Our song is one of extraordinary hope. Hope that has seen the broken and divided state of the world and knows that it cannot afford to hope too small because we cannot repair the world on our own. We need God. In the meantime, we are called to make our corner of the world that God so loves less divided, more trustworthy, more hopeful place. We are called to sing that song of hope.

The best part about Mary's song of hope is that it is never hope unfulfilled. Every year, we remember her bold song to remind ourselves that God has already broken through. Even in the darkness, even in the deepest disappointments, even when we are betrayed, and even when the world looks most broken, we keep this crazy hope alive that God has and God will break through. And today, we sing that hope again, to fan that spark into flame again.

You see, Mary sings about God who wants to love us into loving. What does it mean for God to love us into loving? It means being pregnant with impossible possibilities. How impossible it surely seemed in Mary's first century world that a young girl without a husband would be pregnant and live to proclaim it. For an unwed pregnant woman in Mary's world was subject to being stoned to death. And even more impossible would be the thought that this unwed girl would be pregnant with the Christ child. Simply, utterly, impossible. Yet that which was impossible by the standards of the world was possible with God. And so it is that the love that is God, which comes to us through Mary is a love that is pregnant with impossible possibilities.

God is loving us into expanding our very moral imaginations of the kind of love that is possible for our world. God does not play by, and is certainly not limited to, controlled, or constrained by our rules, our standards, our judgements, our norms, or even our logic in thinking, when it comes to what is possible for God's world and for God's people. It is God's love, that is loving us into expanding our very moral imagination of what a world could look like liberated from a culture that discriminates, dehumanizes, and destroys people because of who they are or who they are not, or because of where they come from or don't come from, or because of what they look like or don't look like. And unfortunately, the list can go on.

Simply put, God is loving us into imagining a world marked by a peace that surpasses all human understanding. This is a peace where the violence that is poverty, inequity and inequality is no more. It is a peace where the world is marked by a freedom where we are indeed free. Free from every yoke that would prevent us from living into our kinder, gentler, gracious, compassionate, better selves. It is imagining a world marked by a justice that is good news to the poor. A justice that truly sets at liberty all those who are oppressed. Such a world seems impossible, yet it is possible with God. The love of God, which comes through Mary is pregnant with impossible possibilities, loving us into the peace, the freedom, the justice, that is the love of God.

And so it is that this fourth Sunday of Advent reminds us that our God, our God out of love for us continues to come toward us, loving us into loving our way out of that, which stands between us a better world and a better people. Left for us to decide is if we will truly open ourselves to receiving and being bearers of God's love and thus being

able to sing with integrity, the Song of Mary, “our soul proclaims the greatness that is the love of God.” On this Advent Four, I pray that it be so. Amen.