

Peace on Earth: Sustaining Hope
Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12
Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2010
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Have you ever found yourself whistling in the dark? Frederick Buechner, a popular spiritual writer, says: "To whistle in the dark isn't to pretend that the dark doesn't sometimes scare the living daylights out of us. Instead...it's to demonstrate, if only to ourselves, that not even the dark can quite overcome our trust in the ultimate triumph of the Living Light."

Whistling in the dark allows us to hang on to hope. It gives us confidence. Whistling in the dark defies the darkness, and insists that it will not win us over.

Often we have to grasp for something that will get us through the dark.

Some families have had more trials than others. I'd like to share with you one family, friends of ours. I've changed their names, though they've given me permission to speak about them. This family seems to be able to keep hope alive even in very difficult times.

Husband and wife, daughter and son—on the surface, the perfect family. Then Christy, the daughter, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when she was in the 4th grade. Her playful life became an intense schedule of medical appointments, psychological counseling, blood testing, medication, and many trips to the emergency room. For Christy, the worst part was being "different." The balance of exercise, food in-take, and insulin injection was so delicate, that more often than not, her parents were on pins and needles, afraid to let their daughter out of their sight. The teen years were like a nightmare, because Christy frequently rebelled against the treatment plan, indulging at a party, by having, say, a second piece of pizza, and then predictably landing in the hospital with her chemistry frightfully out of whack. When she went away to college, the only diabetes doctor nearby refused to treat her because of her pattern of noncompliance as a teenager. She was simply too risky to take on as a patient! About that time, the insulin pump became available, and though it was not covered by the family's insurance, her parents arranged for Christy to get one at their expense.

All the focus in the family was on Christy, so much so that her younger brother, Matt, grew up in Christy's shadow. Christy married and though the doctors advised against pregnancy, she intentionally conceived a child. Her parents didn't know whether to be furious with her or delighted at the thought of having a grandchild, should mother and child survive. The pregnancy was life threatening, and Christy spent many weeks in the hospital. Her child was born prematurely at a precarious birth weight of one pound 4 ounces. The child survived, but then Christy's body started breaking down. They waited for the possibility of organs for transplant. The family waited and hoped. Then a call came. A 16-year-old young man died in an automobile accident and his pancreas and kidney were available and

suitable for Christy. At each medical crisis, the family hoped and prayed that Christy would survive. Now Christy has a second child and is doing reasonably well. There is still a sense, though, that any phone call could bring bad news.

When Christy's younger brother, Matt, was in college, he began displaying signs of depression. Our friends, the parents, feared that the depression would lead to suicide, but it seemed to go away, at least for some months, and then they were hopeful again. The mood swings continued, though, for several years, until Matt clearly could not manage to stay in school or keep a job. He was diagnosed with bipolar disease, also called manic-depressive disorder. Now Matt copes with medication and therapy and some good times and some bad times. It is hard for him to keep a job, and his parents often feel very helpless. But they manage to keep hoping.

With the precarious health of both children, the parents feel like they've been on an emotional roller coaster. They have worried about being overprotective and yet at times they've worried about being too uninvolved, as well. What is the right role for parents to play of grown children who are having physical or emotional problems?

Generally this couple has decided they need to live their own lives. And so the man took a job with a great deal of responsibility because he believed in the work and knew he could contribute. The consequence, though, has been that he is rarely home for an evening or weekend. It hasn't been easy for his wife to cope. She lost a job in the school system when the educational budget was severely cut, and feels the loss of a career she loved. There have been times when this couple felt like two people living separate lives, barely seeing each other.

AND YET—this family is one of the most hopeful I can think of. They admit readily to their struggles, AND YET, they know that life goes on. They participate actively in their church, and they're in a small couples' group. They are loyal to their family and friends, and seek from them support, and then they try to "go with the flow" through the crises that come their way. There isn't a sentence of woe they utter without also adding a hopeful end remark. "We're really worried about Christy, but she'll make it; she's a resourceful person." Or "It's so hard to watch Matt suffering, but he's living the life he has chosen, and what can we do but wish him the best?" Or "We rarely have any time together, but we try to support each other and look on the bright side of our marriage—which has lasted for 40 years."

This kind of hope takes cultivating in order for it to be sustaining. This kind of hope is cultivated with faith and love.

Look for hope in people's remarks this holiday time, and you'll see it. Some people seem to radiate hope. Hang out with those people, and see if it rubs off. I think this church has quite a lot of hopeful folks; they make good company.

John the Baptist said Jesus would come to baptize us not just with water, but with fire! John told people to repent because the kingdom of heaven was near. But Jesus—more

powerful than John—was going to bring more than forgiveness of sins. He was to bring a passion for life, a passion for justice, a hope for the world!

How sorely we need this hope for the world!

The country of Haiti has barely been able to keep hope alive, since the devastating earthquake that hit there last January 12. At each turn, the people hoped and prayed—first that people would be found alive in the rubble, then that they would be found at all, then that there wouldn't be severe aftershocks, then that families would reunite and get the medical care and food they needed. Then that the supplies would start coming and keep coming...Then this October the hope was that the cholera outbreak would be contained, that it would not spread to Port-au-Prince, then that it would not spread beyond Haiti to the Dominican Republic---Now the hope is that AIDS will not spread in the camps, and that the pregnancies since the earthquake soon coming to full-term will be healthy and that families will be able to raise their children to live in better conditions. At each step of the way, the hope is that the next thing will be less destructive. But sadly, 1000 more people each day have been diagnosed with cholera. The wave is still on the increase, and so the hope is that the wave will turn. Society is falling apart—first with poverty, then crisis, and now violence of rape and prostitution and promiscuity in the camps, and so the hope is that when the promised money from countries of the world finally arrives, that life will resume in a more normal way. And ultimately, the hope is that hope will last! Can hope be sustained in these conditions? When is the breaking point? When is there no more hope?

The Christian answers, "Never!" There is always hope. There is always hope that disease will stop, floods will cease, food will arrive, families will rely on each other and survive, and towns and communities will rebuild. There is always hope that faith will bolster the down-trodden. Even if you buried your mother, and your father is sick, your sisters and brothers are hungry, you are lost and afraid—still you can hope to live and live better tomorrow than today. You can hope for a world where there is more equality, for the charity of nations, and for the attention of the world.

And we can be a part of this hope. We can fight against the racism that created slavery and brought slaves to the Island of Haiti long ago. We can fight against the political and economic system that allows some countries to be poor, while others are rich. We can fight against a hoarding of the world's resources in developed countries, while developing countries have little opportunity to improve their status. We can become informed, and we can raise our voices against policies that discriminate. And we can be generous in our charitable giving. And we can pray for peace, that peace will prevail.

That is, we can do these things, IF we are a people of hope, if we are a people of a wide kind of hope that benefits not only ourselves, but also the people of the whole world.

Speaking about hope, a wise rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, said, "In the darkest night to be certain of the dawn ... to go through Hell and to continue to trust in the goodness of God—this is the challenge and the way." The people of Haiti are going through a kind of

hell. I pray that they will be able to be certain of the dawn after the darkness, and that they will be able to sustain their hope and trust in the goodness of God.

The great writer and philosopher, Albert Camus, said, "In the depths of winter, I finally learned in me there was an invincible summer." Yes, there is a winter, but yes, there is also a summer.

To believe in summer and to believe in the dawn! This is the belief in light! We call this the belief in the resurrection! We call this hope of our hearts and hope of the world.

Isaiah prophesied, "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse" (11:1). "Lo, how a rose ere blooming!" We come from a tradition of people who have always believed in hope, hope for freedom out of slavery in Egypt, out of oppression under the Roman rule in Jesus' time, out of poverty, out of personal depression, out of illness, and out of despair. The little shoot of green life sprouts out of a dry stump—we see it, and it allows us to go on with life, whistling in the dark.

I can't read this passage in Isaiah without remembering the day after our son died by suicide. I had emailed the family I lived with for a year in Switzerland about Eric's death, and the next day I received an email with just a picture of a shoot sprouting forth out of a dry stump, with just a word of love and the names of my Swiss brother and sister-in-law, Alex and Madeleine.

We help each other sustain our hope that life is worth living. This is the Church; this is what we do. We help one another sustain our hope, and we do it here together on holy ground.