

Hopeful Signs in Fearful Times – Isaiah 43:19-21, Matthew 11:1-11
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I don't mean to exacerbate all that's wrong with the world, but there are a couple of international stories dripping with tragedy that have not been in the spotlight here at home:

First, there was the terrible fire in the high-rise apartment building in Hong Kong a couple weeks ago that killed 135 people. It was truly a towering inferno and a death trap for those inside. I read where scaffolding surrounded the structure because of maintenance work being done to its exterior. And that the scaffolding was made of...bamboo? Probably not a substance that's going to keep a fire from spreading.

Such a terrible loss of life there.

And then, there's been the ongoing scourge of kidnappings in Nigeria. Last month, 303 kids went missing at a Catholic school there after gunmen stormed into the building, one in a series of mass abductions throughout the country in the last ten years. Some of the children have since been released but many more remain missing.

And just this past weekend, a bride and her wedding party were kidnapped in other location in the country, in addition to a pastor and several worshipers in a different state.

We are left only to imagine the horror for a child snatched away and for the parents who agonize every minute over whether they will see their children again.

Imagine the fear they live with.

These events are, of course, in addition to the continued list of chronic challenges that plague the world: gun violence, war, addiction, broken bodies, broken relationships. They never cease.

As people of faith, we wonder when things are finally going to turn for the better. We wonder whether our acting faithfully is all worth it. The good work we do as part of our faith commitment never seems to turn the tide when it comes to the big picture of justice and prosperity for all.

As Rev. Boyung Lee writes, “By the time we meet John the Baptist here in Matthew 11, he is no longer the bold prophet in the wilderness crying out, ‘Prepare the Way of the Lord!’

“He’s a prisoner—held under Herod’s authority, cut off from the movement he helped ignite. The firebrand voice has been silenced. And in its place, we find a question of his, carried through his disciples to Jesus: ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’

“It’s not just a question, but a cry from the edges of despair. John, the prophet who baptized Jesus and had declared him the Lamb of God, is now unsure. In the dim light of his cell, with execution on the horizon, hope flickers low.

“John doesn’t ask for a miracle. He asks whether his whole life—his ministry, message, and risk—meant anything.

“It’s a question most of us have asked, especially when our efforts for justice and truth feel fruitless. Did we get it wrong? Was any of it worth it?”

How does Jesus respond to John’s question? Not with chastisement or a lecture, but instead with the witness of what was unfolding:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Jesus points not to grand victory, but to quiet signs of transformation. He doesn't hand John certainty but invites him to perceive God at work.

That's where we find ourselves. It's hard for us to see the grand certainty of God's agenda taking over the world and vanquishing evil and suffering. But if we look carefully, there are small signs of God at work.

We only have to have witnessed the program our children put on before us this morning to see it. Those kids in front of us, with their voices, with their innocence, with their energy, are small signs of how God is working in the world. And so are the adults in their lives—you their parents or adult volunteers who made this happen this morning, who insisted that a life of faith is important enough that they lead worship here today. You are small signs of God's presence, of the hope we see in the world.

We will leave this morning with a quiet sign of transformation because of it, of God's unfolding dream for the world, because of the gift these kids have been.

I also look outside our sanctuary this morning, into the narthex that serves as our entry and gathering point before and after worship. And I see Christmas packages abounding, the result of your once-again support of children through the ministry in Cocke County known as Sunset Gap.

This church has been doing this for decades each Christmas, providing gifts to these less fortunate kids in that area. That means that poverty (and disadvantaged folks that come with it) has been around for a long time. And that could have frustrated

you and defeated you over the years as you witnessed this chronic issue continue to flourish.

And yet, you keep giving every year. You have hope that the act of giving a gift to a child at Christmas indeed does, in a small way, reflect the hope you have in a God who is acting in the world. It's a small sign of God's transforming of the world.

Toward the end of this text today, Jesus affirms John—not in spite of his question but through it:

“Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.”

Jesus doesn't see John's crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful.

Part of what makes us faithful is our own exasperation of why justice and peace are so slow to arrive. And what also makes us faithful are the little things we do that demonstrate our hope amid these fearful times.

And so, amid our fears for the world, we keep going. We keep acting, we keep giving. It's our hope.