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Ecumenical Advent Carol Service
Advent 2, 2022

We've been here before

They were cowering in the freezing dark night, no light, no heat, just the sound of the boots of the invading army as they wondered where they would be moved to next. Ever since the neighbouring power had invaded their homeland their lives were consumed with fear and uncertainty. Would they survive the next aggression?

Those were dark days for Israel's northern kingdom, razed to the ground by the mighty Assyrian armies of Tilgath-pileser in 8th century BC. It is to those people that the prophet Isaiah writes: 'bring the prisoners out of darkness'. "I have called you by name. You are mine".

Our minds turn to people closer to us in time who have also been invaded by external powers. People who have no light and no heat to see them through the winter as the invading power attacks their energy supplies. Our minds turn to our brothers and sisters caught up in wars that seemingly have no end....

There was severe social and economic injustice. The vulnerable were exploited and used to increase the wealth of the rich and powerful. Aggressive land practices were destroying the lives and livelihood of the rural poor. While princes and merchants cheat the poor and humble, their priests and prophets become more and more adept at adapting their prayers and words to 'please' their audience. Nobody seemed to care about the people at the bottom of the pile.

The prophet Micah was particularly concerned about social and economic injustice. About the ways in which the rich exploited the poor. To his audience he predicts destruction but promises that restoration and redemption will follow.

Rural communities swamped by the greed of urban expansion?

Sound familiar? Some of us here will be able to relate these words of Micah right back to the experience of our own families and friends in agricultural contexts.

There were those enduring exile in 8th century... those sitting in darkness, in actual prisons or living a life that imprisoned them. Wondering where they would ever feel like they belonged. The effort of trying to settle in a new place that is the common experience of people who have been forced to flee their homeland: "Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour; they fell down, with no one to help" as Isaiah recalls.

I spoke to someone from North Africa this week who had to move to a new place every week for 18 months because the country where he landed refused to let him make his home there and it was no longer safe for him to return to his native country.

They were dark days for people living in the Middle East in the 8th century. These are dark days for many in our world today: whether because of war, climate disaster, fleeing from oppression or finding ourselves imprisoned with our own thoughts and fears. The readings from Scripture we have just heard really say it all. The words are strangely familiar. Familiar for those of who know these readings as part of the build up to Christmas. Or familiar because of the scenes they portray that seem to resonate so strongly this year.

We've been here before.

Our grandparents and great grandparents have been here.

Our great great great grandparents have been here.

And so it goes back all the way to the 8th century before Christ was born.

In the pages of the Bible from which we've heard this evening we hear our longings, our frustrations, our pleas for hope and courage in the face of fear echoed in the words of the Psalmist and the Prophets.

Because the thing about these scriptures that are so sacred to our Christian tradition, is that they tell the story of God's people across the ages. They tell *our* story. They recall times of fear and fragility and they speak of times of hope and restoration. It's all there in our scriptures tonight. This is our story.

We are in Advent. This season of hopeful, careful anticipation of the message of our story. The message that reverberates in everything we have heard tonight and echoes in the chapters of our own stories. That God has been present. In the cries of the Psalmist, in the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah. In the letters of good news of the New Testament and in the story of God amongst us as a human person that we hear in the Gospel.

Tonight we are given time to reflect on these words from the Bible and in the darkness they acknowledge we are guided towards the hope.

At the moment it's the hope that flickers in just two flames on the Advent wreath. It's fragile. It might go out, with just a small gust of wind. But you see it. It's there in that candle flame.

It's the hope that reminds us of God's presence even in the dark times: 'I am the Lord, I have taken you by the hand and kept you'.

It's the whisper of hope that we hear in the words of the Psalmist: 'then they cried to the Lord and he saved them from their distress'.

In a few moments we will each light our own candle. Each small candle reflects the hope that is with us as we journey towards Christmas.

On its own the light given from the flame of this candle is fairly weak and that might reflect well how you're feeling at the moment. But as one candle lights the next and the next until the whole chapel is filled with the light of our candles we will have a beautiful reminder of the strength of the light that is coming and that we wait for expectantly during Advent.

This is the hope that comes from being together in our hope. And to celebrate our shared faith in a God who comes amongst us to restore and redeem. The light of these candles reflect the hope that comes from a community of believers whose scriptures and experiences of God teach them that the darkness will not have the last word.

By Christmas there will be five candles lighting up our church and the light will be much stronger than the darkness. The light will come into the world to shine in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. Let us be people of hope who can point people towards the light this Advent season.