

Christmas Eve, 2016
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Glen Ellyn

Where is the hope?

This could very well be the question of the moment, around the world, from rubble strewn Aleppo, Syria to the stunned Christmas market square in Berlin, to the shot-up Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's West Side. And here in Glen Ellyn, it is a question that is frequently asked at the St. Mark's Tuesday Bible study. It is a question that traverses the globe, is a stranger to no one. And I think many of us, if not everyone, has the question on their lips or somewhere in their heart this Christmas Eve. Where is the hope? When John the Baptism is locked up in prison, Jesus confront this question by asking the crowds who gather around him, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see?" For us, the question is, "What have we come to St. Mark's to look at? A sweet, Hallmark card? Hallmark cards are in Walgreens and

dollar stores. What then have we come out to see? Hope? Yes, I tell you, and more than hope – terrifying hope!”

A word like hope is vulnerable to cheapening, as can be seen in its current sentimentality. Like love, grace and faith, its counterpart cousins, hope is a giant of a word that has become a weakling. It is flimsy and shallow. We say things like, “I hope you enjoy your sandwich,” and “I hope you have a nice afternoon.” Hope is nice, but along with the sandwich baggy, something to forget about and throw away. But there still is a real, authentic hope - a terrifying hope. I like to think of myself as an optimist, taking on challenges and complicated projects with enthusiasm. Perhaps you’ve heard the adage, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” I truly believe it, and I’ve seen crises as fertile ground for planting seeds. But while hope and optimism are related, they are different animals.

Optimism, like its root “optic” is about what can be seen. During the season of Advent, we see one, then two, three and four candles lit, showing the light growing in strength. A single flame in the darkest night reassures us. At least we can see something.

Episcopalians love always what can be seen – stained glass, colorful vestments, shiny chalices, and beautiful architecture. But when all that is taken away, when the color and beauty is gone, when you can't see anything, not even a spark, when you are in the naked pitch black - that is when optimism gives way to hope. It is at midnight when the angels appear to the shepherds, when the baby is born and when the tomb that held the crucified Jesus becomes empty. These are moments of true hope, a truly terrifying hope.

Where is the hope? Not since 1997 and not until 2046 will Christmas and Chanukah converge as they do tonight. As the sun has set around the world, Jews gathered in their homes are lighting the first candle of the menorah. Chanukah marks the victory of a Jewish revolt in 165 BCE against the Syrian armies, which had converted the Temple in Jerusalem into a pagan shrine. The Syrians has desecrated all the jugs of oil that were used for lighting the Temple candelabrum or menorah. The Jews who set out to re-consecrate the Temple found only one small

flask of undefiled oil enough to light the menorah for one day. The menorah was lit, and the menorah flame continued to burn not only for one day but for eight days. To remember and celebrate the event, an annual holiday was observed by burning candles for eight days. As important as the miracle of the oil lasting eight days is, Chanukah also marks the rededication of the Temple and is a call to all Jews to rededicate themselves to the study of Torah and the observance of the 613 mitzvot, or commandments. Christian hope is no different from Jewish hope. In the defiled, dark Temple, before the menorah was relighted – there was hope. Before the match was struck and the first wick began to burn, hope was present – present in the tiny bit of oil, present in the presence of God.

Where is the hope? Several weeks ago, a small private plane crashed in a field in McHenry County. The pilot was killed, a man named Rob Sherman. Sherman was an activist, despised by many for his objection to implicit government endorsement of religion in slogans, symbols and official prayer. He was against, in his

own words, “coercive, phony freedom promoted by those who want government to pick a side and marginalize disbelief.”

Sherman was determined in his cause. Twenty years ago, because of the threat of a lawsuit, officials in Wauconda removed a pair of lighted crosses that had stood on the top of a water towers. In response, hundreds of homeowners and businesses erected lighted crosses on private property. Instead of seeing this is a defeat, Sherman was thrilled. He said, “It proves that people do not need the government to do religion for them.” Sherman’s death is a tragedy. But we should be thankful for his courage to challenge the juggernaut of mindless religiosity. Sherman was onto something that goes one step beyond what he said. What Christmas proves (and Easter, Chanukah as well) is that not only people don’t need the government to religion for them – people do not need the government to be hope for them either. This is so important for country to understand right now. In recent years, people have looked to the government, and in particular, our presidents, to be beacons of hope. Some are saying now that the

president-elect is our hope. Others are saying that hope has died.

Situating hope on the commander-in-chief is a set-up for sure disappointment and disillusionment. No wonder our country is ill-at-ease, divided and discouraged – when we are looking in the wrong places for hope. Please do not misunderstand me. I

believe we need a government to govern, make laws, represent our interests to the world and to defend the right and welfare of all people. But hope is not the domain of government. Government is what can be seen, voted on and voted out. Governments make decrees, or as some leaders do now, send tweets. Imagine Joseph getting a tweet on his cell phone from #therealemperoragustus – “registration underway – go home to get counted now.” Decrees are made, but it is God who stands silently in the darkness, who brings tidings to the shepherds when they least expect it. In the pitch-black night. And they are sore afraid.

Where is the hope? Last year beginning in November, Starbucks served its coffees in plain red holiday cups. Having removed snowflakes and snowmen that appeared in previous years,

Starbucks was declared anti-Christian. A boycott was called for by offended Christians, who argued that Christmas and the Christian faith were under attack. If there is a war on Christmas, it is not the first one. In 1647, Puritans in the English Parliament banned Christmas day celebrations, and in 1659, Puritans in Boston outlawed Christmas, arguing that there was no Biblical support for the holiday. Looking to the first Christians in 100 and 200 AD – they did not celebrate Christmas. Easter, the resurrection of Christ, was their celebration. Christmas, and its importance, is a recent phenomenon. In 1855, New York newspapers reported that most churches were closed on Christmas and less than half of the states recognized Christmas as an official holiday. As recently as 1900, most Christians did not celebrate Christmas. But beginning in the 1890s, department stores began to promote St. Nicholas as a way to promote gift giving at Christmas. Christmas wasn't about Jesus but about St. Nick. And it worked! A tradition of gift giving took off. In the 1930s, clergy and religious groups decried the ungodly consumerism and advent of profit-seeking

over piety. Their objections fell on deaf ears. The tables turned so much so that by 2005, Wal-Mart was criticized for not using the word Christmas in their marketing. Bill O'Reilly of Fox News fame decried the political correctness that had run-amuck, coining the "War on Christmas," outraged that materialism was not being done in the name of Christ.

Where is the hope? I'm here to say that you won't find it on a Starbucks coffee cup or in advertising by Wal-Mart, Target or Macy's. Backed by some loud mouths, Christmas is captive to consumerism. But hope is not. In the silence, in the darkness, is where we begin to find commitment to Christ. Jesus has never been the reason for the season, but the reason to love our neighbors.

Where is the hope? It is a good question to ask and ponder on this Christmas Eve, on this first night of Chanukah. Let us follow the tradition and example of our Jewish brothers and sisters by rededicating ourselves to the true meaning and wisdom of these

miracles – rededicating ourselves to the place where hope is found
– when all light is extinguished, all signs of safety are nowhere to
be found. And then suddenly, a baby cries.

Amen.