



The Problem With Superheroes

I have a problem with superheroes. Now and then I feel I could use a visit from one, but I would not want to sink into the habit of sitting around waiting to be rescued. After all, that is what superheroes do best. They swoop in out of nowhere, dispatch the bad guys, and put everything right. So unless you actually *are* the superhero—and I did enjoy making an appearance as Wonder Woman on Halloween back in 1977—there is little to do but sit passively and wait.

Waiting and watching for someone to swoop in and solve your problems has a certain dangerous appeal. Rooted in a sense of helplessness and deep distress, this expectation pervades many of the traditional

scripture readings for Advent. “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” cries the prophet. Save us! Rescue us! Set right all that is wrong in this messed-up world!

I admit I sympathize with the acute longing expressed in these passages. But their passivity makes me uneasy. I often breathe a sigh of relief when, on the second Sunday in Advent, John the Baptist comes striding out of the pages of the New Testament, howling and stinging like a sandstorm, hurling imperatives: *Repent! Change your ways! Bear good fruit! Be content with what you have! Share!*

As intimidating as John can be, I like the fact that his gaze is fixed on *now*. Don’t just look back in wistful

A Different Kind of Hope

by Laura Alary

remembrance, or peer ahead into a future you hope someone else will create, make changes *now*. His idea of Advent waiting and hoping is both active and purposeful. Don't just sit there! Do something!

But there are times when doing something is simply not an option.

A Season of Hope?

A little over three years ago, my mom had a stroke. When I went to see her in the hospital, I brought a card with a small water colour painting of Spring Garden Road in Halifax. I told her I hoped we could stroll along that street and prowl through the familiar shops when she recovered. But she did not recover. Instead, she had more strokes and spiraled into physical and

cognitive decline. Every now and then, terrifyingly aware of what was happening to her, she would ask, "Is there any hope for me?"

Words deserted me. I knew what she meant by hope: "Will I ever be the way I was before?" Because of the damage to her brain, and the degenerative nature of her condition, the answer was *no*. The usual understanding of hope as a good outcome was meaningless. On the contrary, such a notion of hope trapped her between a past she longed for but could not have, and a future which looked very different from what she wanted.

When Advent came, I found myself resisting the prophetic visions I had once found so beautiful and

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comforting. Those familiar texts, with their visions of an idealized future or a restored past, made me restless and discontented—even a bit angry. All that hope—future-oriented and optimistic—seemed false. *I hope the tests are clear. I hope we can save this relationship. I hope the plane gets there safely. I hope she recovers. I hope everything is OK.* The truth is, sometimes the news is bad. Sometimes nothing turns out well.

Sometimes our hearts break.

A Different Kind of Hope

One day as I was reading, I came across this passage from the prophet Habakkuk:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off*

*from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

I was struck by it because it seemed to speak of a different kind of hope—a hope that does not depend on a good outcome. The rejoicing in these words has nothing to do with improved circumstances. Hope is not rooted in the promise that one day the figs will blossom the way they did in the good old days. Rather, this hope is connected to *presence*—a profound experience of communion with God, here and now.

Spiritual teachers from many

traditions tell us that when we go rushing ahead into the future, or cling to the past, we become distracted and miss the present moment. And it is in the present—the only time that actually exists for us—that God comes to us.

The more I pondered this different kind of Advent hope—a hope that springs from being aware of the presence of God in the *now*—the more I thought I should put together my own Advent lectionary. It would start with Habakkuk, then move on to Paul, who spoke so passionately about the unwavering presence of Christ in and through all circumstances:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Maybe we all secretly long for a superhero, someone to tear open the heavens and descend from on high to fix everything. But the Christian story does not offer that. Instead, it holds out to us a different vision of God—weak and vulnerable, but fully present, as close as our own flesh and blood and breath. The Christ child—like Jesus on the cross—is a symbol of a different kind of hope, not the hope that says everything will be OK, but the hope that declares there is

nothing that can separate us from the steadfast love of God.

Rehearsal Time

When my mom was dying, a few friends from her church came and gathered around her bed and sang to her. They could do nothing to change the inevitable. They could neither undo nor recreate the past, and they could certainly not open up a new future. But they could be present. They surrounded mom with love and music. And as I see it, that is what it means to make Christ present.

When we can let go of the things we usually cling to—memories of the past, expectations for the future, our fond notions of how things should be—we open ourselves to an encounter with the living God, here and now. And when this happens, Christ comes into the world, again and again.

Advent is a time to practise hopeful waiting—not peering into the future waiting for rescue, but letting go and trusting that we belong to God, and that God is doing something purposeful in and through us right now. Advent is a rehearsal. It teaches us to wait without losing heart, which is really how we need to live all the time. By moving through this holy season slowly and mindfully, we prepare ourselves to meet the Christ child, and to recognize Christ whenever, and however, Christ comes.