

The Branch Will Not Break

Advent I December 1 2024

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Out on the farm we had an epic treehouse. It was an open concept (as in open air) mid-century split-level affair. The first floor was the kitchen/living room and the second floor was the bedroom. Between the two was a narrow vertically angled branch with small shims nailed horizontally to it. There was a significant drop between the “staircase” and the ground littered rusty tin cans and broken bottles and old tractor parts (did I mention the treehouse was in the middle of the farm dump where garbage was burned in big barrels and the fire retardant trash was thrown?) The only way to get to the bedroom was to shimmy across that narrow scary branch—not a problem for the big kids, or brave kids. They taunted and dared the rest of us to come over. I didn’t take the bait. But other kids did. You know, no one ever seemed to fall off “stairs”, and in spite of it’s slender girth, the branch never broke. Never.

Every afternoon, Liz takes our cat Mookie out in the yard for supervised play (he is an indoor kitty.) The squirrels enjoy tormenting him by running along the top of the fence and then jumping into the trees. He loves it. I always marvel the agility of squirrels playing in the treetops. They have complete trust in the branches that they leap among. It is rare that a branch breaks and the squirrel falls—they fall for other reasons like mis-timing a leap, but that isn’t the branch’s fault.

This is what I know—live tree branches are filled with sap? resin? mystery nutrients that make them flexible and resilient, with the ability to nourish the tree. Branches that are compromised are brittle and and snap easily. I am not botanist, but this idea of “righteous branch” in Hebrew prophetic writing to describe the messianic promises of God is a fitting metaphor for the holy strength of hope.

The righteous branch is an image primarily found in the book of Jeremiah. In the context of ancient Israel, the Righteous Branch refers to a future king who will seek justice and bring restoration to the people of Israel living in exile and under the rule of the Babylonian empire.

This was not an easy message for Jeremiah to preach. While he was consistent to his calling as prophet, he endured much abuse because of it. His relationship to the holy was complicated. He wrestled with his own inner doubts and conflicts as revealed in his writings that scholars call his “confessions.” (Jeremiah 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:9–10, 14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–12, 14–18) He had periods of despondency when he expressed the wish that he had never been born or that he might run away and live alone in the desert. He reached the point of calling God “a deceitful brook, . . . waters that fail” and even accused God of deceiving and overpowering him. Yet there were times of exaltation when he could say to God, “You are the delight of my heart.” So, when Jeremiah is promising his exiled community that they will be delivered by the Righteous Branch, it is not a platitude. It is a prophetic promise borne out of a faithful, authentic struggle with reality and heartbreak, where hope has withered within the hardships of life.

Today we are beginning the season of Advent, and I know that many of us are lurking in the shadows of despair. With Jeremiah, we have had a season where we want to run away or live in the desert (or Canada or Costa Rica) Our belief in love conquering all or that better angels will prevail has been sorely tested. There is much that we bear witness to that threatens to extinguish any possibility of illuminating hope.

And so, we sit in these shadows, with our terminally ill friend, the grieving parent, the heartbroken and devastated minimum wage earner who has lost everything in the floods of Helene; we sit in shadows with the terrified trans-kid who doesn't dare come out because of fear of bullying and intimidation; we sit in the ache of the destruction of our earth home, and in the desperation of not knowing what tomorrow or January will bring to our country.

As we sit in these shadows, the branch is heavy and bending, but it is not broken. As we rest in the boughs of life, Advent beckons to not only stay still, but in that stillness be steadfast in waiting for the revelation of hope breaking through. In spite of the heaviness, the huge-ness of fear, hope is still running through the veins of the world. It might be a ragged, worn hope, a tired hope, a doubtful hope, but it isn't broken or dead. This is my strongest belief.

Ivone Gebara is a Brazilian Catholic nun, philosopher, and feminist theologian. Her theology and faith is born out of living side by side, in community with women living in poverty and exploitation. These are women who are at the very edge of the margins of life, where each day is about the struggle to survive. Gebara writes of their witness to raggedy hope: *God is our hope because we **want** to go beyond the terror, violence, and fear that crush us. God is our hope because we often have no visible hope, because the haze of fear that envelops us seems terrifying. God is our hope as the ultimate cry for justice: a no to unjust killing, to arms and armies, and a yes to dignified life. God is our hope in our despair...For this reason, within the mystery of our lives, God is our hope.*

But what is God? We would say that God is relatedness, and, as such, also personal...By analogy, God is a human person, the sap of human life, but also the sap of the life in trees, in flowers, in animals, and in all that exists. By analogy, too, God is man, woman, breeze, hurricane, tenderness, jealousy, compassion, mercy, Mystery.

The important thing is that God is not a pure essence existing in itself, rather, "God is relationship...Within this perspective, the word "God" is the name we give to the extraordinary relationship that evokes ecstasy and leads us to see flashes of the greatness of the mystery of the Divine Body....To speak of God is to affirm the "something" that we are and that goes beyond us, based on human experience, and moving beyond it."

God is our hope. God is the branch that will not break. It will bend, it will creak, it will not always be obvious that it will hold, but still, it stands. This is my strongest belief.

The purple octopus lives about 4600 feet below the surface of the ocean. In March 2007, marine biologists encountered a particularly special purple octopus mother. For fifty-three months, this mama held onto her eggs until she believed they were ready to hatch. It was the

longest brooding period on record of any animal on earth. Octopus eggs are extremely vulnerable to being eaten by other creatures, and so the mother octopus must stay with them until they hatch and swim away. This one protected her eggs for four and a half years. In her book, **How Far the Light Reaches**, science writer Sabrina Imbler asks what else we would call this if not “something like hope.” A hope for her babies and their future, hope in herself to know when to give her babies the safest moment to be born, to give them their best chance.

Like the mother octopus, I wonder if we might dare to hope in an unknown future. A raggedy, rugged hope for a future worth staying steadfast for, day by day, even if we cannot know how it will all turn out. Hope that God will be there no matter what comes. Hope that calls us to show up with love today that is always connected to tomorrow.

God is our hope.

And if God only exists in or IS relationship, then I know hope runs in the veins of my life. Because my hope was affirmed on Thursday, when a bajillion friends gathered in our FH for a banquet, a FEAST! It is affirmed when I can lay on the sofa, exhausted, with my head on Liz’s shoulder and sing to her in a very bad voice “you are the sunshine of my life” and we can laugh together. Hope is affirmed in a group text conversation with my sisters about how we didn’t die from rabies or tetanus poisoning when playing in a treehouse constructed in dump site filled with broken bottles, an overturned outhouse and dirty tin cans.

Dorothy Sölle, German 20th century liberation theologian wrote, *“God dreams for us today. Today, at this moment, God has an image and hope for what we are becoming. We should not let God dream alone.”*

We should not let God dream alone.

The branch will bend, but it will not break.

Jeremiah promised a righteous branch in the midst of exile and his own inner torments and doubts.

Brazilian women in poverty and terror can’t see hope, but still proclaim it as the ultimate cry for justice.

A purple octopus great with babies will wait for the safest time to bear her children, even if she has to carry them for years until it is safe.

With Jeremiah and Brazilian women and purple octopuses, we can have hope for a better world. We can wait and hope. God dreams this for our world. WE should not let God Dream alone.

Amen.

SOURCES

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