

There’s a story I like to share. It comes from the obituary of the Rabbi Hugo Gryn, one of Great Britain’s most respected rabbis. When he was a boy, he and his family were imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp. They were Orthodox Jews, and even though it meant even greater danger to them, Hugo’s father insisted they observe the Sabbath and all the festivals.

Hugo remembered until the day he died a time when, to observe the Sabbath, his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a Shabbat candle. Hugo was furious and protested, “Father, that is all the butter we have!” His father said, “Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope.”

This morning, we lit the candle of peace on our Advent wreath. I don’t know about you, but I’m having trouble being hopeful that peace is going to be achieved anytime soon. Think of all that’s going on around us. Last week, 19-year-old white supremacist Peyton Gendron pleaded guilty to killing 10 people at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York.

He believed in a conspiracy theory called “The Great Replacement,” the basis of which is the idea that white people are being slowly and intentionally replaced by people of color and immigrants. He allegedly chose to attack the store in Buffalo because it landed in the 14208 ZIP Code, which is 78% black.

A gunman killed five people at a gay friendly nightclub in Colorado Springs. Two members of the extremist group Oath Keepers were convicted of seditious conspiracy after trying to overturn the presidential election using violence and force.

On the world stage, Russia decided to start a war in Ukraine, causing unthinkable death and destruction. In Tehran, following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Guidance Patrol for wearing an “improper” hijab, there is protest and civil unrest. What is there to give us hope that peace is possible?

I think hope is interesting because we either have it or we don’t. I can’t tell you to have hope. It’s not something we decide on. We can only have hope if we see a reason to have hope. Hope can only come as a result of what we see or observe.

That's what the prophet Isaiah provides in our reading today. "A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Jesse was the father of Israel's greatest king: King David. Under David's reign, Israel prospered both spiritually and financially. But that was hundreds of years before Isaiah came onto the scene. At the time Isaiah became a prophet, the nation of Israel was a stump of a nation. It's hopes and dreams were cut off and destroyed.

God made a covenant with them. If they were to remain faithful to God, keeping God's commandments, caring for the weak and the vulnerable, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with their God, their God would be faithful to them. They would prosper.

But they failed. Isaiah received the call to prophecy in the year 742 BC. In 721 BC, the Assyrian Empire would conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In 587 BC, the Babylonian Empire would conquer the Southern Kingdom of Israel, destroy the temple in Jerusalem, and deport the inhabitants to Babylon.

Isaiah believed there would be a future King in the line of David. That King would restore Israel's fortunes. The stump of Jesse represented death, but from that stump there would come a shoot, a savior. That shoot would be a sign. It would be a reason to hope. As Isaiah prophesied, "On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nation's shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

The reason this text is assigned for the season of Advent is that Christians have viewed Jesus as that savior. Jesse came from Bethlehem. Jesus came from Bethlehem. Isaiah's prophecy says that the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon this new King. When Jesus began his ministry, he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me..."

So, what are our signs of hope? As Isaiah indicated, you can see them in nature if you pay attention. Years ago, I was walking across the church parking lot where I was serving and I noticed a bump in the pavement. I went over to check it out. When I got there, I saw that it was mushrooms pushing up from underneath the pavement. I think it was because we had received a particularly large amount of rain in recent days.

It was astounding to see mushrooms growing and lifting up 3 or 4 inches of pavement on top of them. I pulled out my phone, took a photo, and made it my screensaver on my computer. So, every time I got on my computer I'd see that image and think, "Okay, what can I push through? If a mushroom can do that, what am I capable of?" For me, that was a sign of hope.

The author of the Advent book we're reading describes the Christmas Truce of 1914. She describes it this way: Some accounts say it was the German soldiers in their trenches who first began to sing carols on that Christmas Eve. Then the British soldiers, huddled in their own trenches, responded with some of their own country's traditional carols. Back and forth, the two enemies singing to one another in the darkness.

When dawn broke, the German soldiers cautiously emerged from their trenches and approached their enemy. The British, observing that the Germans carried no weapons, nervously climbed out of their own trenches, and the two sides advanced toward one another in "no man's land." Accounts indicate that the soldiers exchanged small gifts of cigarettes, food, and souvenirs and helped one another retrieve their dead and wounded. More carols were sung, and some reports claim that the soldiers even played a game of soccer.

Now, that was a short-lived break in the fighting, but I think it is so memorable for people, because it stands as a sign that peace can break out in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected time. And it all started with the singing of Christmas carols, an activity in which our church will participate in the coming weeks.

I think the church is called to be a signal to the community and the world that there is a savior among us, that we have divine help in the midst of complex problems, that there is a way to know peace, that there is hope in the midst of despair, there is joy even in brokenness.

In a moment, we will break bread and celebrate holy communion. When we serve one another, when we welcome every person to participate, when we care for the needs of those around us, communion becomes a reason to hope. It becomes a small indication, a small sign that a better way is possible.

Because we can go weeks without food, but we cannot live for a minute without hope.