

The Thrill of Hope, a Weary World Rejoices
Part of the Sermon Series for Advent and Christmas
Isaiah 2:1-5
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Madeline L'Engle calls Advent "the irrational season." I have a little experience with that. Back before seminary, before church work kept me rather occupied, I used to drive back to Michigan to spend Christmas with my family. It was a 12 hour drive, and one year in particular, it was December 23, just a few minutes before midnight, when I finally drove down their sleepy, snowy street. Most of the houses, of course, were dark. A few had Christmas lights still shining outside. It was a picturesque silent night. All was calm.

And then I turned into my parents' driveway, where nothing was calm, but the entire inside of the house was bright. Filled with trepidation, I opened the front door and found myself standing in what looked like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition or Fixer Upper, or some show like that, just at the point in the show where the hosts want you to believe they'll never finish in time. Doors were off the hinges, several walls were half painted, new curtains and blinds were stacked in the middle of the living room, no furniture was in sight, four Christmas trees were piled up on the back deck, and the kitchen was an explosion of flour, frosting, and fruitcake. My mother explained that the family was coming over for Christmas.

Now there's a few things you need to know about that statement. The first is that my dad's parents had traditionally hosted the annual family Christmas celebration, but both of them had died in the past few months. So my parents had boldly declared that they would host the event. The second thing you need to know is that my father is one of 7 children, and

my grandmother was one of 13. There are towns in South Carolina with smaller populations than my family. But my parents had invited them all over, and thought this was the perfect motivation for a few home improvements. "When, exactly, did you start this project?" I asked, "This morning," my mom said. "And honey," she said, "It's really good to see you. Now pick up a paintbrush."

This is the irrational season. At some point, I fell asleep on the floor near a ladder. I woke up to a long list of errands my mother and I were to complete while my dad took care of ... everything else. And we made good time. The last errand was stopping by the bird store to pick up bird food for the unruly macaw my parents had adopted a few years earlier. That bird of theirs was a giant, and he and I were mortal enemies. By extension, I am slightly terrified of all oversized birds, and genuinely anxious when in confined spaces with feathered creatures.

So while my mother selected the right food and made small talk with the clerk, I stood quietly in the corner, near the employees' office, trying to avoid eye contact with anything with wings. Which is how I noticed that inside the office was a cardboard box with three puppies inside. An employee told me that someone had left them outside the store overnight. But they only dealt with birds, so the puppies were being dropped off at the humane society later that day. I picked up one of the squirmy puppies, black with some brown marks on his face and legs. He licked my face, settled one paw on each of my shoulders, laid his head against my neck, and

fell asleep. I didn't put him down again. "You cannot possibly bring a puppy home right now," my mother tried. But I could see it in her eyes. Those were empty words. Reilly, the first dog I ever called my own, came home that Christmas Eve.

This is the irrational season. We headed home, my mother rehearsing ways to calmly inform my father about the newest member of the family. I was absolutely certain the adorable, abandoned puppy factor needed no further explanation. We walked in. My dad looked down from the ladder. "I'm not even going to ask," he said. "And you should probably go look in the living room." In the living room was my brother, holding the puppy he had adopted just a few hours earlier. My mother closed her eyes, and that's still all I'm allowed to say about that moment.

Now, I wish I could tell you that the next morning, generations of McDevitts arrived to a flawless house filled with impeccable decorations, an elaborate feast, and perfectly behaved puppies. I can't. What I can tell you is that they arrived at a house that was half put back together, mostly painted, and hardly decorated. One set of curtains was actually hanging upside down, something we wouldn't discover until days later. Dinner was served late. All told, four dogs ran in and around people's legs. At least one puppy peed in an unauthorized location. But no one minded.

It remains the Christmas everyone still talks about. It remains the Christmas filled with lots of laughter, which was unexpected on the first Christmas without my grandparents. It remains the Christmas where everyone saw the evidence that sometimes, oftentimes, life is utterly unpredictable. It remains the Christmas where everyone walked through the front door and encountered not absolute perfection, but instead, a hand-lettered poster board that read, "Welcome to our home. It is

a work in progress, where the beauty of possibility is always stronger than the confines of reality."

This is the irrational season. A season in which the beauty of possibility is always stronger than the confines of reality. And that possibility is why we light a candle of hope this day. By the way, the full quote from Madeline L'Engle? "This is the irrational season. When love blooms bright and wild. For if Mary had been filled with reason, there'd have been no room for the child." Hope is a little irrational, isn't it? Or maybe a lot irrational. Just listen to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is convinced that a day will surely come when all of God's people will listen to and obey God's teachings and as a result, they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. If you look around the world today, that sort of vision is irrational, isn't it?

The idea that swords and spears would be turned into ploughshares and pruning hooks. The idea that we would take the weapons we use to fight one another and turn them into the tools we need to feed one another. But, for as unlikely as that seems to us today, it was just as unlikely back in Isaiah's time. For he spoke to them in the midst of tremendous turmoil.

A strong and respected leader, King Uzziah, had died. The new king was weak, and threats were pressing in from every side. Peoples and kingdoms were being destroyed left and right. Conflict was around every corner. Neighbors feared one another. Everything people had come to count on was melting down. Darkness and despair was the only common language. And anyone in their right mind could see that things were only going to get a lot worse before they got any better. Into all of this, Isaiah says — "Guess what? Great news! Everything is going to be okay. Actually, everything is going to be better than it ever

has been before!" You can see why the prophets themselves were considered irrational.

And so maybe a word about prophets is important here. We've talked about this before. We often think of prophets as people able to predict the future, and we think of prophecy as maybe something akin to holy fortune telling. But that's not quite right, at least as it pertains to biblical prophets. Biblical prophets like Isaiah, their gift wasn't an ability to see the future. Their gift was the ability to see the present through God's eyes. And it was because they could see the present in a way that most of us could not that they had a different view of the future, too. If they were left to look at the world around them through only human eyes, Isaiah and all the rest of the prophets, would have sounded different. They would have sounded like us — wishing, but wondering. Eager, but uncertain. But that is not their tone. In the days to come, Isaiah says, people of every sort will flock to God's house, and seek out God's teachings, and live by God's intention. And when that happens — not if, but when — they will turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. They will never again hurt one another; they will only help one another.

It sounds irrational, but maybe that's because hope is irrational. And if hope is irrational, it's because faith is irrational. And that's okay. Maybe that's exactly what's needed. Because God's love is irrational, too. But let us not get too carried away. Irrational is not the same as magical. Christmas may sometimes feel magical, but our entire faith is pinned upon the conviction that it is anything but. Because magic is smoke and mirrors and slight of hand. There is nothing slight about Isaiah's language. They will beat their swords into ploughshares, he says. A literal translation of that verb means "crush to pieces" or "pulverize." And that could refer to an understanding of what

astonishing physical effort would be required. Or it could be symbolic. In any case, Isaiah says our swords will not become ploughshares without enormous effort.

But Isaiah has hope — irrational but very real hope — that we will get there. His hope — his irrational but very real hope, seen through God's eyes — turns our attention to the present work needed to make such a grand dream possible in the days that are surely and swiftly coming. This is the irrational season, the poet wrote. "When love blooms bright and wild. For if Mary had been filled with reason, there'd have been no room for the child." That kind of hope is hope enough for me, at least, to light a candle and pray that the light it shines will help us see like the prophets — that we will see not only what needs to be done, we will see how we — you and I, today — really can help usher in God's promised day — no matter how much chaos swirls around us.