



Over the years, I have heard a few people say *Advent* is their favorite season of the entire church year. I will be the first to admit, initially, I found their liturgical top pick to be rather odd, honestly, unless you are a die-hard fan of John the Baptist with his camel hair attire or you like the idea of the sun darkening or stars falling from the heavens. However, as time has gone by, I must confess I have been reeled into these sacred weeks, myself. Because even with the annual “brood of vipers” refrain from John and the not-always-overly-cheerful end

times imagery, there remains this insistent theme of contagious hope throughout: a hope that may not always be so easily seen, except by those who are willing to look deeper than the bare surface, to dig into the depths of utter beauty that God thoroughly insists is there all along. And I have come to notice that the people who claim Advent to be their favorite season of all have a rather provocative way of bringing such hope to life themselves.

One such person was the pastor on the seminary campus while I was there: The Rev. Ruth Fortis. Pastor Ruth had a voice that I always thought would fit Advent quite well: one of those voices that I firmly believed would be a fitting female equivalent to Sir David Attenborough, who narrates *Planet Earth* and other nature shows on *National Geographic*. She had that kind of voice that would draw your attention far more than normal to the beauty of the world that we often take for granted, while also being more than capable to have that prophetic voice to increase our awareness of social injustice and God’s even more stubborn call in these Advent days to care for those in impoverished circumstances. I envisioned that she could very well be the precious extension of the Divine potter that we heard about in Isaiah this morning: that she shaped and molded us with her voice that made it seem as if we were in God’s very own sacred craft room when she spoke.

Except, the greatest hope that came from Pastor Ruth during her time there was a program she crafted from scratch called Summer Seminary Sampler, where high school youth would be invited to come to the seminary campus during the summer months to get a glimpse into the world beyond the place they called home. For a few weeks, these teenagers were invited to stay in groups in the seminary apartments, make meals together, venture out for service projects during the day, sit in on some classes across the street, and worship in the evening. The idea was not to somehow fool all these high schoolers to consider going to seminary a few years down the line, but to help them see the difference they can make in the world in a variety of ways they may have never realized from their hometown roots. They volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House, served a meal at the local men’s shelter, led a vacation Bible school at an inner-city church, helped build a house with Habitat for Humanity, and much more. They even went on career shadow days to give them the chance to consider what they may do in their young adult life.

Again, every day with those young, most precious children of God, I envisioned Pastor Ruth being a potter at the wheel, shaping and molding these teenagers in such a transformational way. It wasn’t just about Pastor Ruth seeing the beauty in them that maybe the rest of the world refused to even look for, because they were all supposed to be self-centered lazy teenagers anyway; that they had no hope whatsoever of contributing anything of worth for the good of society. No, Pastor Ruth believed it was her calling as a present-day prophetic voice to help these high school youth recognize their own beauty

that God had blessed them with from the very beginning, and, better yet, refused to ever take away from them, no matter what.

Pastor Ruth is the reason why I made a rather odd choice for the Hymn of the Day for this worship. It is not an Advent hymn, per-say, which I am sure would drive the Advent die-hards absolutely nuts. And yet, it has that insistent theme of hope playing throughout. I still remember this hymn, "Change My Heart, O God" being played at the seminary, and Pastor Ruth's eyes being closed and moving along with the music as she sang the words with her prophetic voice: "Change my heart, O God; make it ever true. Change my heart, O God; may I be like you. You are the potter; I am the clay. Mold me and make me; this is what I pray."

Yes, with every Advent comes the time for us to cry out to God to change our hearts so that *we* may bring a precious glimpse of divine hope to our own homes, communities and beyond. But, let's not forget to give a little credit: the divine potter has already molded all of us into most precious children of God, even on the days when we struggle to see it ourselves. Sometimes we need a Pastor Ruth to remind us of that beauty within us, the very beauty of Christ himself, and the ultimate insistent hope that has already come to life in him for us and for the whole world that God still so loves. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!