

Where is Hope?

First Sunday of Advent

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It's the new year of the church, the First Sunday of Advent, and we begin our time of preparing and waiting for the coming of the divine among us at Christmas. I was also asked to reflect in today's message on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which is on December 3rd and has been observed worldwide for the last 33 years. (I can talk about this for a long time, which I am not sure was known when I was scheduled for this Sunday!)

I am a disabled person, so when I say "our" and "us" and "we," I mean disabled people. And I usually say "disabled people" but other disabled folks may prefer "people with disabilities." So how are things with us disabled people these days? Well, it's not easy to generalize, as 27 percent of Canadians older than 15 have at least one disability. That is a lot of people, with an extremely diverse range of physical, mental and intellectual disabilities, visible and invisible. I and many other disabled people often say "If you have met one disabled person, you have met *one* disabled person. Someone else with exactly the same medical diagnosis can have completely different needs and attitudes".

I think I am safe to say that, overall, in Canada, we have made gains in the last century and this one. We have made gains in this church, with improvements in accessibility over the years. There is planning taking place now on how to become even more accessible. We have made gains since the old days of "*ugly laws*" – when cities had laws that forced deformed or disfigured people to stay out of public view. Some of these laws were on the books until only 50 years ago. In the old days, even more disabled people were kept out of sight through institutionalization.

A century ago there was a movement for eugenics: the belief that civilization depends on reducing undesirable, "unhealthy" traits in the population, such as disability. This was a popular cause. It attracted many Canadian leaders. Tommy Douglas, before he became Premier of Saskatchewan and the father of universal

healthcare in Canada, wrote that “subnormal” people should be sterilized and segregated. (He did turn away from this belief later in life.) Nellie McClung, famous for her fight to have women recognized as persons in Canada, later fought as a eugenicist for *disabled people in Alberta to be sterilized by force*. Eugenics only fell out of favour when Nazi Germany murdered hundreds of thousands of disabled people, in a program that developed the techniques for the Holocaust.

Now our Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. Accessibility is enshrined in legislation. Disabled people fought for these rights — they were not handed to us. Disabled activists in the 1970’s and 80’s blocked intersections with their wheelchairs, occupied government offices, and dragged themselves up the steps of legislature buildings to win such protections.

And now these are under threat! The United Nations regularly assesses the countries that signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it was Canada’s turn this year. The report was scathing, particularly about assisted death. In Canada, Medical Assistance in Dying is not just for people at the end of life. ***Disabled people who are not near death can get it, or be coerced into it.*** And we can be approved for assisted death faster than for, say, a wheelchair. And one thing pushing disabled people towards assisted death is that the provincial government supports keep disabled recipients well below the poverty line. The federal government promised, when assisted death began, that the Canada Disability Benefit would be a ‘once in a generation’ measure to lift these disabled people out of destitution. It took six years for the benefit to finally begin its first payments this summer. It was restricted to a minority of the recipients of provincial supports. The maximum is \$200 a month! This isn’t lifting anyone out of anything.

And speaking of scathing reports, the analysis of how Ontario has met its obligations under our own accessibility law was just blistering in its assessment. Did you know that the law requires that Ontario be fully accessible to disabled people by January 1 – 2025? Did we all enjoy living in this utopia all year? Of course, the province missed the deadline and sent the report into the void, along with the one from the United Nations.

The allies who supported the disability community in making those gains in the

past now see us as a liability, not a priority. We are on our own, at the same time that we are experiencing a surge in eugenics. Yes, it's back, with a vengeance, dressed up in new language — and in ableism. Let me speak about ableism for a moment. Most of us here have heard of racism and sexism and other 'isms'.

Ableism is prejudice against disabled people. It is rooted in the view that disability is a flaw, and that ability is a binary — you are either “normal” or disabled. By contrast, I think in terms of a spectrum. All of us are somewhere on this spectrum of ability, and we move back and forth along the spectrum during our lives.

Much of what holds disabled people back and oppresses us is not our disabilities, but ableism, which devalues us and prevents us from participating fully in society. When government or business groups allege that it is too much of a burden to ensure disabled people can access businesses, that is ableism. In cities that have rideshare services like Uber, drivers will frequently pass right by rather than pick up disabled passengers with wheelchairs or walkers or service dogs. That is ableism. Abusive and hateful rhetoric is directed at disabled people by politicians and opinion makers — we are depicted as lazy, scammers, fakers, burdens, undeserving. “***Get a job!***” disabled people are told. Well, in Ontario the province cut the funding to the agencies that assist disabled people on benefits to find employment. All this is ableism.

Let me give you another illustration, from a great classic of our culture: **Baywatch**. Many of you watched this show. A long time ago, when there were only two TV channels, everyone watched the same shows, (including children, as we were the remote control for the TV!) And ministers could use examples from ***Bewitched*** or ***The Beachcombers***, and everyone would know the characters and the setting. But that doesn't work anymore. Baywatch, however, was one of the most popular shows in the world, for 11 seasons. And in one episode, a man in a wheelchair wants to get across the beach and down to the water, so he asks the lifeguards about building a ramp so everyone can have access to the ocean. And the lifeguards get to work. They build a beach-ready wheelchair! They don't discuss this with the disabled man. They don't do what he wanted. They come up with a solution that benefits only one person, not an entire community. But they know best, because they are abled people. That is ableism.

Ableism shows up in conversations, in culture, in the treatment of disabled people as objects. We are to be pitied, we have value only if we are productive or inspirational: we are not considered to be full persons with dreams and hopes and passions. We are assumed to have lives that are just pain and struggle with no joy or love, we owe any stranger who asks an explanation of “what is wrong with us.” We have to prove our disabilities when we’re told “You don’t look disabled.” We are considered inspiring when we are just doing something mundane like cooking or going to work, we are criticized if others think that we are “getting something we don’t deserve” or going beyond what they think our condition allows. Someone posted online, “I see cars downtown at night with disabled parking placards. What are disabled people doing out of their homes after dark?” And a disabled guy responded: “***We’re disabled. We’re not werewolves!***”

I’m not out to make folks feel guilty if they have ever said or thought something like this. This is pervasive throughout our society. We are all caught up in it, for disabled people do this too — we can be ableist about ourselves and towards other disabled people. As I said, each disabled person is unique, and is not an expert on other people’s disabilities. We, disabled people, internalize the ableism that surrounds us. We judge ourselves and are ashamed. We try to hide our disabilities. So all of us, across the spectrum, need to face and wrestle with ableism.

Society expects disabled people to respond to hateful rhetoric and ableist policies with politeness. But, you know, if there is a debate going on about whether disabled people deserve dignity, don’t be shocked when we don’t say ‘*Thank you*’ for objectifying us. The moment disabled people stop being inspirational or entertaining or a backdrop, and start being inconveniently human — angry, political, outspoken — then we are tagged as rude, unreasonable, ungrateful. But the humanity of disabled people isn’t measured by how nicely we tolerate being dehumanized. When I say this, it makes people uncomfortable. Pushing back against ableism upsets people. Disability itself disturbs them. The reality that anyone can become disabled in an instant by an accident or an infection is especially distressing, and causes people to dismiss disability and disabled people, as if pretending that this can never happen to them will keep them safe.

But what is also discomforting, disturbing, upsetting, unsafe? — the season of the church year we are beginning. Now, our culture started Christmas three weeks ago. (Over a month ago if you have been in Dollarama!) So in this season of Advent we — all of us — want quaint Christmas stories, familiar carols, *‘Holy infant so tender and mild’*.

But that’s not this season. Advent doesn’t give us much of this at all. This season is completely counterintuitive to our way of living. It’s about God infiltrating a cosmos which is under the power of death. It’s about watching, waiting, for the end. It has the sun turning dark, the stars falling from heaven. The Gospel passage for today says that two people will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. And if that’s not disturbing, I don’t know what is!

This is the Sunday of Hope. We just lit a candle of hope. Where do I, where do we, find hope, in the midst of this Advent of discomfort, of eugenics, and ableism, and lots of other ‘isms’? I confess that often I feel like Shakespeare’s description in one of his sonnets. I look upon myself, and curse my fate, wishing I was one more rich in hope.

One place where I find hope is in the disability community itself, in its diversity, among disabled people with their joy and tenderness and messiness and brilliance. There is hope! And I look to scripture, what the church calls our “song for the journey”. At the start of that journey, at the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, we find:

“Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” All of us are created in God’s image, and that divine image is realized in each of us in unique and different ways, including disability. The whole person has value and dignity, created in God’s image. Knowing this, embracing this, can lead us to perceiving disability not as a flaw, not as a problem to be fixed, or eradicated, but as part of the natural limits and conditions of the created order, one of the diverse ways of being human.

That is hope. And hope is in the story we are going to hear in a few weeks, so familiar that we forget how much it disturbs the powers and ways and ‘isms’ of the

world — **that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.** Jesus Christ was born as one of us. Jesus came in Bethlehem 20 centuries ago, he comes among us today, and he will come again to make all things new. And he didn't come as a baby and stop there. This is a seamless story, told through the seasons of the church year. Jesus grows up, he is baptized, he teaches, he makes people angry, he is arrested and tried and put to death, and — *and* — he is raised from the grave.

And it gets even better! When Jesus came to his friends on Easter evening, risen from death, he told them, *“Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I, myself.”* Jesus Christ kept the wounds of his crucifixion in his risen body. He chose to do so! ***Jesus chose to be disabled.*** He chose to identify so completely with disabled people and all of the folk marginalized and dehumanized by society that he appeared with his disabling wounds. That is hope, especially for disabled people, but hope for everyone, for if Jesus identifies so particularly with the marginalized and dehumanized, then there is hope for all of us.

We just heard from the prophet Isaiah, *“All the nations shall stream in.”* I think of the entire spectrum of ability pouring in, to hear of this hope. The same prophet says, *“Follow your will, Lord, and put our hope in you.”* Hope! The word ‘hope’ appears 200 times in the Bible. Rejoice in hope, it says! We have our hope set on the living God, who is the saviour of all people. By God's great mercy we have been given a new birth into a living hope.

In many churches on Christmas Eve, you will hear the carol **O Holy Night**, and the words *“a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices!”* And so we wait, for that thrill of hope. We wait to celebrate the coming of our risen — yet still disabled — saviour, who is the Prince of Peace and the King of Hope. In this Advent season, friends, may you watch and wait in hope, preparing to stream into Bethlehem, where the hopes and fears of all the years meet, and hope and peace and joy and love are ours, coming into this weary world in the most ordinary place and in the most vulnerable of humans, coming in power to break the sword and to bring peace, and to put an end to all the isms. And we and this weary world rejoice. Thanks be to God who makes us rich — in hope! *Amen.*