

pThe Power of Hope

This morning is the first Sunday of Advent, and as indicated by the first Advent candle, Advent is about hope. It seems evident to me, however, that not all hope is created equal. False hope is the cause of much misery and this is at no time more evident than at Christmas.

Part of the problem is our quest for perfection. For some, Christmas has to be perfect, perfect decorations, perfect meals, perfect presents, perfect music, perfect children, perfect spouses, perfect ambiance: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," with perfectly plowed streets and shoveled walks. This may come as a newsflash to some, but it's not going to happen. If you are hoping for perfection, or anything close to it, you are setting yourself up for a major disappointment.

Another false hope comes without invitation to those who have lost loved ones, especially those who have recently experienced the death of a child or spouse. There is only one thing they want for Christmas, and in the season of toy making elves, dancing snowmen, and talking animals, why not? Why can't they just wake up Christmas morning and discover that all the heartache was just a bad dream? But such hope will only dig the pit of their grief deeper. The hope we need for grief must come from somewhere higher up than this.

A third kind of shaky hope is relational. We hope the wandering child will make it home for the holidays. We hope for a Christmas card from an estranged friend indicating a desire for reconciliation. We hope for that long awaited engagement ring. We hope she will say yes. We hope our presents will reignite our spouse's love. Many singles hope, that in this season of romance, their special someone will appear under the Christmas tree. But Advent is not about getting what we want or think we need to be happy. Advent is an invitation to place our hope in the sure and certain promises of God.

One of the great Advent passages in the Bible is found in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17. At the beginning of this story, the hope of Abraham and his wife Sarah had faltered. God had promised them a son many years before and had told them that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. They waited a long time for this promise to be fulfilled but finally decided that Sarah at least was too old to have children. So when Abraham was 86 years old, Sarah suggested that Abraham would have to sleep with her servant girl Hagar. And since Abraham couldn't see any other solution either, he agreed and Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

2

Thirteen years later, God spoke to Abram and renewed the promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son of their own. By this time the whole idea was completely ridiculous. Abraham was 99 and Sarah hadn't gotten any younger either. Abram even laughed at God's proposal, as did Sarah when she found out about it. But God wasn't kidding. He made it perfectly clear that He meant to do what He promised: Abram and Sarai would have a son of their own in a year, no surrogates needed. And, just to keep them and us aware of the fact that God's promises are no laughing matter, God told Abraham and Sarah to call their son "Isaac," which in the Hebrew means "he laughs."

From this rather funny story that is no laughing matter we learn several things. We learn that when God makes a promise, He will fulfill it. We learn that sometimes we may have to wait a long time to see God's promise fulfilled. We learn that doubting God's promise and impatiently taking matters into our own hands is not a good idea (in fact, it is sin) and leads to all kinds of problems and complications, as illustrated by the eventual grief brought into the family through Hagar and her son Ishmael. **We learn that God will always have the last laugh.**

We also learn the meaning of biblical hope. In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul refers back to the Genesis 17 story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Paul says in verses 18-21: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

Now that's what we mean by biblical hope. Biblical hope is a hope stronger than any other hope because it is based on belief in the perfect integrity of God Almighty. God does not and cannot lie, and--except for lying--there is nothing impossible for Him to do. **So when God promises us something, we know, He will bring it to pass.**

Another feature of biblical hope is that this hope emboldens us and empowers us to do things we would not otherwise attempt or succeed in doing. Once God made it clear to Abraham that it was through he and Sarah and no one else that a son would come, Abraham looked at Sarah and at himself in a different way. Suddenly, they were not laughing at God's promise any more; they were laughing because of it. Long forgotten passion and intimacy returned, and as they set out to do

3

what God had promised they would do, God strengthened them. Romans 4:20 says that Abraham "was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God." I imagine Abraham and Sarah laughed at their accomplishment, found joy that they never imagined they could know again, wept with the privilege of being partners to a miracle. Yes it was a very long wait, but this was a promise worth waiting for. **God's promises are always worth waiting for.**

A third thing we learn about biblical hope is that biblical hope brings righteousness; it enables us to do what pleases God and to live in a right relationship with God. Paul says in Romans 4:22, through 5:2a: "This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." **When we do what we do, because we believe what God has said, what we do will be credited unto us as righteousness.**

A fourth and final thing we learn about biblical hope here is that when we stand on this hope and act on the basis of this hope, it will bring us joy, even in the midst of sufferings it will bring us joy. Romans 5:2b-5 say, "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

I want you to know that I am talking about hope for two big reasons this morning. One reason I'm talking about hope is that this is the first Sunday of Advent and Advent begins with hope. The first candle on the Advent wreath is the candle of hope. Christmas begins as hope. Long ago, the prophet Isaiah promised, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." In Isaiah 9:6, further detail is given, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Given many years before it came to pass this promise brought hope, encouragement, and direction to the people of God. It gave them a reason to keep on living when everything for the moment was going

wrong. It encouraged them to do what was right so that when Messiah came they would be found faithful. It united those who believed and gave them a common identity when the circumstances of their lives would have otherwise divided them. This vision of the future made the present tolerable and filled it with meaning and purpose.

We can see evidence of these things even now, these many years later. As we wait for Christmas to arrive, we have something good to look forward to, we find more reason to be kind to one another and even to strangers, we sense a camaraderie not felt to this extent at any other time of the year. Such is the power of this hope. The future vision of the whole world under God's rule and filled with His peace, joy, and blessing--His Shalom--keeps us going.

The second reason I am talking about biblical hope this morning is because it is the prescription for much of what ails our families and us at this present time. In the weakness of the present economy and the dire predictions by some who say that it is likely to get a lot worse before it gets better, we are worried about losing our jobs, losing our insurance, not having enough money to pay our bills, losing our retirement savings. I'm not thinking of retiring any time soon, but I told Betty Jane last week: "we lived through being poor when we were young, and I reckon we will figure out how to do it again in retirement if we need to." Underneath that expression of hope is the promise of God that He will take care of those who have committed their lives to His service and to His care. We firmly believe that the hope we place in the promises of God will not disappoint us.

I know many of you are struggling and that some are struggling a lot harder than others. I know that your struggles are putting pressure on your marriages and on your faith. I know that some of you are wondering if it's even worth it to keep trying or even to keep living. But, here's the deal: You are not in whatever you are in alone. God is with you. Secondly, God has a purpose for what you are going through. Furthermore, He will work things out for your good if you do not abandon your hope in Him.

Now I know that modern life is complicated and expensive and that the pressures can be very great, but I was thinking this past week about Joseph and Mary. I was thinking about Joseph and how he reacted when he first heard that Mary was going to have a baby that he knew wasn't his. Do you remember what he was going to do? Of course you do; Joseph had decided to divorce her. He didn't plan to make a big stink about it, but he was going to break their engagement, end their relationship. Only God's word, that came to him in a dream, prevented

him from separating from Mary.

I also thought about their forced journey to Bethlehem to be registered and taxed. Mary was nearly full term with her baby and she had to walk or ride on the back of a Donkey for 80 miles. Furthermore, when Joseph and Mary finally arrived in Bethlehem, she went into labor and there was no room in the inn. A stable was her delivery room. And, their problems didn't stop there. Two years later they had to pack up and run to Egypt to avoid the wrath of King Herod. Think about all that when your house is a mess and the kids are driving you crazy. How much do you really have to complain about in comparison. Even the most hassled among us have it pretty good compared to that.

But we need to ask the question, how? How did Joseph and Mary keep it all together and manage to stay together, bring Jesus into the world, and raise Him as their son? How did they manage to do this while raising other children, keeping Joseph's business in business, and warding off attacks from evil rulers and the devil?

Three things quickly come to mind. #1, they trusted and obeyed God. #2, they stuck together; once Joseph decided to go through with is marriage to Mary, he remained faithful; never looked back. And, #3, they were both pulled forward by the hope that spoke to them from the future. They understood, however imperfectly, that Jesus was a special child with a special destiny. The words of the angels and shepherds, the visit of the magi, the prophecies uttered by Simeon and Anna at His dedication, and even Herod's attempt to kill Him, helped them to understand that their mission as parents was larger than the challenges they faced, no matter how daunting.

Throughout this Advent season, let us remember that we have a charge to keep. Some are charged with preserving marriages and raising children. This is hard and crucial work; you have been given the power to shape the future through the shaping your children. All of us are charged to receive the Spirit of the Christ who came and to prepare to live with Him in His eternal kingdom. All of us are charged with the responsibility of sharing the message of Christ with others that they too may be transformed by the hope He brings into the world. Let us embrace His hope. Let us live and work in hope until Jesus comes again.

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Sermon for November 30, 2008

The Power of Hope
Genesis 17:1-4; 15-19, Romans 4:18-5:5

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