The Wonder of Christmas

1st Sunday of Advent:  Hope

It’s been a tough week.  **I hope this sermon goes well**.  It just didn’t seem to flow.  It was pulling teeth.  **I hope it comes off well; after all its Advent**.  This story tells itself.  But, that’s what makes it tough.  **I really hope I do the story justice**.

I hope they play one of those old “**Bob Hope Christmas** specials.”

Did I ever tell you that I have a **cousin named Hope?**  She lives in Kentucky, I think.  I also knew a guy who **went to Hope College** on the west side of the state.

**Interestingly flexible word, “hope.”**  It can mean a lot of different things.  **Here’s some sayings or quotes** about hope.  Maybe we can look at what it means in our culture.

  **“Hope springs eternal”…**Ever hear that one?  It’s like little flowers popping up as you frolic through a mountain meadow.  No time to get discouraged because it just keeps springing up, eternally.

**Hope is not a plan**…**but it is necessary**, or you will never make one and you will never move forward.  **Hopelessness means I’m not moving forward, I have given up**.  This creates **shame**.

**Hope is a dangerous thing**…this can mean two different things.  For the tyrant, or bully, it means that if the ones they are seeking to oppress have a little hope, that can cause a problem.  Maybe they don’t just roll over as easily. Or, for regular people, to hope means that they are in danger of being disappointed when what they hope for doesn’t come to pass.

I want to get **your opinion** on these.  I need you to **vote either** “helpful” or “nonsense”.  And finally would it make a good lyric in a country music song.

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.  (MLK)  So there’s **little hope and big hope**.

To live without Hope is to cease to live.  (Fyodor Dostoyevsky)

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.  (Emily Dickenson)

Hope in reality is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs the torments of man. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness. (Desmond Tutu)

Hope is patience with the lamp lit. (Tertullian)

God's mercy and grace give me hope - for myself, and for our world. (Billy Graham)

He that lives upon hope will die fasting. (Benjamin Franklin)

These quotes are kind of a **mixed bag**.  Some people believe it’s the **gateway to heartache and disappointment**.  Others think it’s the **only reason anything good happens** or **we ever persevere through the tough times** to get to the good times.

**We watch lame Christmas movies…don’t judge me.**  But there is something comforting about watching something that **doesn’t ask too much of me**.  I know how it’s going to go.  If I need to go do something, **I won’t miss the subtleties of a plot twist** while I’m changing laundry.  And they always end happy.  **They don’t disappoint.  They are hopeful, even if unrealistic**.

**There’s hope for the widower who happens to be really good looking and sensitive.**  For the **workaholic big city woman** who can’t slow down.  There’s hope for the **small-town factory** that could get **put out of business by the workaholic** woman.  There’s hope for the **three-legged dog at the pound**.

**Yes, life isn’t like that.  Mine hasn’t been.  So, here’s the question as we head into advent.** Are you losing hope?

**If our hope has an object that we haven’t received,** or it hasn’t been realized, then you might be losing hope.

* “I hoped for a **better job** to support my family, but it didn’t happen.”
* “I hoped that person who I really like **would notice me**, but he/she didn’t.”
* “I hope it’s a **good Christmas** and my family gets along.”

**If the object is something specific and we don’t get what we hoped for then we could, as they say, lose hope.**

**But that kind of hope seems small, almost like a goal**.  Can’t you just **move on to another** one?  Yes, depending on how much **emotional capital** you put into hoping for it.

**Is there a more comprehensive hope, not about one event, goal, or dream, no matter how important?**

**That’s what the hope that Jesus brought is about**.  It’s bigger because he is the **one who provides** us hope, but he is also intended to be the **object of our hope**.  He gives us a **reason to hope**.  But he is **also what we are to hope for,** not just those temporal things.

**There’s nothing wrong with hoping for a better job or for someone to get better, but it can’t stop there.  But maybe you aren’t hoping big enough or for the right thing.**

Here are a few of the things that can kill that bigger hope that Jesus came to give us.  Hope killers;

Isolation…from God, his word, and His people.

In isolation we don’t get wiser, we get weirder.  **We were never designed** to live this life outside of community as believers.

Extended waiting period…If we are only **hoping small, the longer the wait, the more likely we are to give up.**  And let’s face it, in our **instant gratification culture,** we aren’t very good at waiting.

Real or Perceived losses…**Those setbacks or failures that were supposed to be steps toward** what I had hoped for.  That **car repair bill** at the absolute wrong time, that **infertility diagnosis**, being **downsized**, your **child getting into trouble**…

Losing sight of the end…We get **caught in the everyday grind** and **forget why we are doing it**.  This is what we call **“drift.”**  It happens to companies, organizations, churches, and people.

**Saying all that makes it seem like the negative quotes about hope are right**.  Just **stay in your lane**, **keep your head dow**n, and **“hope for the best.”** Oops**!**

**How is the hope of Christmas different?**The difference is that…God is the only source of unstoppable hope.

**When Jesus is the provider of hope and the object of that hope, that’s when it can’t be stopped by circumstance**.

**It’s this Jesus that helped Paul to be content in any circumstance.**

You heard in the video that there are 300 Old Testament **prophecies that foretold of the coming Messiah**.  **Each one was a promise of hope about what God would do one day for His people who needed a Savior to rescue them.**

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.  Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14  **One down 299 to go!**

**Some 700 years later, this promised prophecy of hope came true as the virgin Mary gave birth to her firstborn son.**  They named Him Jesus because He was to save the people from their sins.  That’s the reason Jesus was born; **He was our Savior who could rescue us from our sins which separated us from holy God**.

**“Come on guys, just need to hang in there for a while and wait…700 years.”** That’s unstoppable hope.  **It’s not natural** to us.  **That’s unstoppable hope!**

Unstoppable Hope needs a rescuer.  **God sent the first missionary**.

**From light into darkness with us.**

**I want to give a disclaimer** for this next part of the sermon.  It doesn’t really **fit the warm cuddly Jesus,** who was swaddled in the manger in Bethlehem, **cooing and giving folk a warm feeling in their hearts**.  This part of the Christmas story won’t be in any **Hallmark Christmas movie**.

**14**Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might **destroy the one who has the power of death**, that is, the devil, **15**and **deliver all those** who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. **16**For surely it is not angels that he helps, but **he helps the offspring of Abraham.** **17**Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.  Hebrews 2:14-17 ESV

“helps” = **rescuing someone by taking hold of them and lifting them out of a dangerous situation**.

**When Quinten was little**, he was swimming in our friend’s pool in Alma in a floatation device that zipped on like a life jacket.  Only **a few feet from his mom,** who was facing the other way, he decided to free himself from the restraints of this life jacket by unzipping it.  He immediately sank to the bottom of the pool, and no one noticed it except **two grade school aged boys** who were sons of our friends. Without alerting the adults, they jumped in, swam to the bottom, and pulled him out.  **They rescued him, “taking hold of (him) and lifting (him) out of danger.”**

**This is not a picture of someone coming and making some nice helpful changes so people can feel good about themselves**.  This is a scene where there is **danger, chaos, and someone taking action to drag someone to safety,** who is unable to extricate themselves from said danger.

**Here’s where it gets to a PG 13 rating**.  This is where it gets violent.

**Sometimes the rescuer needs to get his hands dirty.  He must mix it up to bring unstoppable hope.**  The rescuer we need must be a fighter.

**Before I read this verse, please don’t turn it into something sweet gentle metaphor for how Jesus saved our souls**.  But the Son of God came to **destroy** the works of the devil.  1 John 3:8b

Translation: It’s as if Jesus said, **“If you want to be about destroying things, Satan,** I’ll show you what it means to destroy!  I will go all the way **to the cross and disarm you**, defang you, and **cancel the payment of sin** for all of humanity who puts their faith, hope, and trust in me.

**I’ll come as an innocent baby**.  **I’ll go to the cross as a perfect sacrifice.**  **I’ll defeat death and enjoy a glorious resurrection.**  Then, **40 days later, I will ascend** to Heaven and **send my Holy Spirit** to empower and lead my followers.  My Father promised I would come in time and make no mistake**; I will come again to claim what is My own**.   **The next time I will come** **riding on a white horse with fire in My eyes, a crown on My head, a robe dipped in blood and the armies of heaven following Me on white horses with a prominent tattoo on My robe and thigh that reads: King of kings and Lord of lords.”**

Pretty intense, huh?

**If you haven’t thought about Jesus in those terms, go read Revelation 19** when you get home.  **That is another promise that was made about a second coming** that Jesus will fulfill in time.  **Jesus is coming again, not to deal with sin**; He did that first time He came at Christmas with all the hope of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled.   **However, when Jesus comes back a second time, He will do so bringing salvation with Him for all those who are waiting for His return.**

**Destroy the works of the devil**.  All the **systems of this world that play upon our weaknesses and sin**.  Those will be **laid waste, violently**.  The **death and deterioration** of our bodies will be crushed.  **The curse of death waiting for us** will be destroyed.  **Our enemy and all he has built** here will go down with a whimper.  **Human trafficking**, done.  **Drug trade**, done! **Abuse,** done! **Corruption**, done! **War,** done! Poverty, done!

**That’s why the enemy is so active now.**  He knows his violent end is coming and the **Jesus, on the horse, with the sword will arrive.**

**It’s what we remind ourselves of when we take the Lord’s Supper and say in** 1 Corinthians 11:26, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”  **We are still waiting for that day**.

**Broadman’s Commentary notes that over 500 hope-filled times in the Scriptures it speaks of the return of Jesus.**  That Jesus will return is said **more frequently in the New Testament than anything else about Him**.  Because God fulfilled the over **300 prophecies of hope** regarding His initial advent, as stated in the Old Testament when Jesus was born, this **gives us great hope and confidence that He will do the same to fulfill the over 500 references** of His second advent in the days to come.  **However, for now, we continue to wait with hope.**

**The question is, do you really want a rescuer like that or would you prefer something a little more easily managed**.  **Someone that** **rescues me from what I want to be rescued from, but one who maintains a respect for my agenda and my personal autonomy.**

**You want God to rescue you from lesser things than your addiction to sin and self-focus**.  You want him to rescue you from **momentary troubles and discomforts and heartache,** but not the big rescue from yourself.  **That’s hoping too small**.  **That’s not the guy with the sword, eyes blazing, and blood on his robe**.

Unstoppable Hope needs a finish line.  The early Christian Church was carried forward by what has come to be called the blessed hope of the return of Jesus.  When disciples met one another on the street, their word of greeting was **“Maranatha!” which means, “Our Lord, Come!”**

**20**He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon!” Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! **21**May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s holy people.   Revelation 22:20-21

**But is our hope only for waiting for the king to come** on that horse and lay waste to our enemy and rescue us, **taking us home to heaven** to be with him in perfection?  Does it boil down to the message, **“I know it stinks, but just hang in there, try to avoid the devil’s schemes to make you more miserable by waiting.”**

**Doesn’t that leave all that happens here pretty much meaningless?**  My time here is **just waiting to get pulled off the sinking Titanic.**

**That’s believing in what we call “the forgiveness only gospel.”**Jesus did all that cross stuff and walked out of the grave just to **get us off this dying planet**. No, he saved us to follow him and join him right here and now.  His **Kingdom** and destruction of what Satan has built is something we can join.

The middle of verse 26 and following says, “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.  27And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, **not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.**”  Hebrews 9:26-28

**To me, eagerly awaiting his return means that I’m about getting ready for it, not pining away for it**.  Eagerly awaiting **is not the attitude of using his people and his words as some sort of sedative** to get me through this mess until he returns.  **That’s not eagerly awaiting.**

The unstoppable hope that comes with a rescuer and a finish line also has something for right now, other than surviving and waiting.  Hope brings freedom that leads to fulfillment now!

**He came to set us free now so that when he returns, he picks up people who are already in small ways practicing what it will be like when they are with him in glory.**

**This chases away the discouragement** that comes from waiting**.**

**When we are focused on what God wants us to do to make his kingdom present for others, we lose track of the fact that we are waiting.**  Waiting is easier when you are **doing something meaningful**.  When we are **helping others learn how to follow** Jesus, that’s making disciples, we **lose track of much of the tedious and depressing part of waiting.**

**In a sense, it’s not waiting, it's preparing.**

**10**The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.  John 10:10 NLT

**The gateway to enter the full life is not having everything figured out.**  It’s not **learning to deal with the disappointments of life while still holding on to the hope of heaven.**  No, the gateway to life that is full is **hearing God’s voice and obeying or following that voice.**

**13So prepare your minds for action** and **exercise self-control**. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation **that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed** to the world.  1 Peter 1:13 NLT

Hope in action:

1. Confess that you hoped too small.
2. Praise him for what he has done and is doing.
3. Pray for someone who might be feeling hopeless.

Let’s practice those three steps together this morning.  Bow your heads.

**13**I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will **overflow with confident hope** through the power of the Holy Spirit.  Romans 15:13 NLT

**Do you want to stick with small hope where the object of your hope is not eternal and all powerful?**