

First Week of Advent, 2018: Hope

Message:

Friends! I'd like to begin with prayer this morning!

Prayer:

Introduction:

So, this week, and for the rest of our Sundays up until Christmas, we'll be celebrating the ancient Christian season of Advent.

Advent means "arriving," or "coming" in Latin, and it's an old season that the church has used to help people to spiritually sort of prepare for Christmas and what the holiday means for us, and to also prepare for Jesus' return, which God has promised us.

So its a season of preparation, really. And each week in Advent we'll look at another topic: Hope today, soon Peace, Joy, then Love.

Today:

This morning we'll remember some of the prophetic promises that God's people were looking forward to, and the ways they were asked to prepare themselves for the day God would make good on those promises.

And we'll also remember the hopes we have as Christians, the promises we still long for, and one particular way we can prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Promises:

And God did make so many promises to his people, Israel; through the prophets there were so many things that God told them to expect. Prophetic promises about the ways God would restore their fortunes, about the ways God would save them from their terrors, about the ways God would validate them for worshipping Him, when all the people around them worship all sorts of idol gods instead of the true God.

The prophets promised that God would bring peace for them, provide for them-- food, shelter, safety--and would even bring non-Israelites into his people, into the people of God.

Amazing promises, God set amazing hopes for his people. And so many of these promises can be summed up in the hope that God would be with his people, with them as he'd been at the start of creation, closer than when the Temple was down the street, closer than when a Spirit-filled prophet speaks

to them.

Immanuel:

And it was an expectation that came true, right? In Jesus?

Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be, finds out that Mary, Jesus' mom is pregnant--and not by him; so he decides to divorce her, quietly, saving her honor. This is an integrity move. But the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, and says:

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him

Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." (Matt 1:20- 23, NIV)

Mary realizes that in her son the promises of history

are about to come true. She sings a song of praise, of remembrance:

***"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he
has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me
blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me
— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from
generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped
his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers." (luke 1:46b-55)***

Mary, and so many others, saw in the birth of Jesus the

realization of the hopes of Israel, saw God coming through, “even as he said he would,” showing up and being with and for them.

And Jesus showed up, and lived, and died, and rose back to life, and changed the course of history for everyone, for all creation. Whether you trust God or not, the flow of history has been shaped by Jesus. We talk about this stuff all the time; but we can't forget that Immanuel, God with us; Jesus--he came after generations and generations of waiting, and praying, and hoping...and of preparing.

Called to Prepare:

God's people were always being called by their prophets to prepare themselves for the day when God would come through. Every prophetic passage in the Old Testament that talks about the day when God would come through for His people is preceded by calls for repentance, for preparation and a return to the Lord.

And the arrival of Jesus, his entrance into ministry; it was prepared for, too. Mark sets this up for us:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,

**who will prepare your way"—
"a voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'** "

**And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message:
"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

**At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:
"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."**

(Mark 1:2-11 niv)

Now, John was a crotchety fella; he's a fire & brimstone sort of guy. But he had an important role to play in the fulfillment of God's promises; he was a preparer of people, a prophet of God.

Jesus calls him the greatest of all the people born before his arrival, because of the way he prepared people for Jesus, calling them to make a way for him.

In Between:

But we need to to make way for the Lord in our lives, among us, don't we, because in many ways we're in the same place as God's people were in right before Jesus showed up.

Of course, there are some pretty big differences between us & them: we're God's People not because we were born into some particular ethnicity, but because we've been reborn into one particular Spirit, into one particular life, the life of Jesus, right?

But there are hopes that God's People had before Jesus first showed up that we still have, we're still looking forward to swords and spears being turned into the honest tools of work, we're still looking

forward to a time when “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore,” as the prophet Isaiah puts it. We're still looking for a time when the widow and orphan aren't judged for the color of their skin or in what language they can most comfortably say "I love you."

And Jesus didn't leave us alone in this middle time; we've got the Holy Spirit, a promise God made to his people long before Jesus arrived, the Holy Spirit who can help us in a thousand ways to prepare for his return. God gave us the Spirit for us to live in between the time he left and the time he would come again.

The Spirit who brings in our lives, as we rest in him, virtues like “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” We have each other. We have Scripture. We have our guts, our intuition, which I find myself checking in with more and more lately.

But hope itself, this habit of God's people since long before we gentiles could even be God's People, this habit is itself a resource, a gift. It can sustain us until Jesus' return, just like it sustained the prophets and God's People long ago. Hoping shapes us for the acts

of faithfulness that we're called to offer, and the trust in God that we're called to cultivate, until Jesus comes again.

Hope is one of the most powerful gifts we're given as Christians, when it's real hope: based on who God is and what God has done for us.

Hope & Worry:

Hope neutralizes worry. It reminds us that God is to be trusted, and reminds us to turn to the God who will care for us no matter what, whose goodness we can believe in, who will work out all things for good, for us and those we love, if we live in his calling for us. Hope neutralizes worry because it turns us back to God and reminds us of who God is and the good God longs to do through and for us.

Hope & Humility:

Hope demands our humility. It reminds us that we can't through our clever quick thinking or arranging of whatever pieces we control, do for ourselves nearly as much as God can do for us. God does not help those who help themselves; He generally lets those who help themselves receive their own help, which is always less effective, enjoyable, and surprising than the help

he gives us. He waits ready to make the call or sign the check or give us the hug or advice we really need if only we'll say to him "Help me. I cannot help myself."

Hope makes us humble because it turns us away from ourselves, to God and reminds us of God's longing to do good for us and through us. In this way hope makes us patient, as we realize our limitations and our limited perspective and resources.

We can only pray, with trusting hope, that God would "do greater things than we can ask or imagine," when we've realized that the view from our imaginations and questioning hearts is too small where we stand. But God sees past all horizons.

Hope & Gratitude:

Hope reinforces gratitude.

No Christian deserves the hope of resurrection, the hope of rest, the hope of Heaven coming to Earth, of Jesus' return.

You don't deserve it. You're not entitled to it. It's a gift, freely given, the same way we've been freely released

from the debts we owe God and freely empowered to resist sin and reject evil.

We are empowered to dependance. Does this make sense? We have been freed into slavery. Our lives are not our own; we have been expensively bought. We have been freed from death and freed for service, and so wherever we find ourselves living, and moving, and doing the stuff of our lives, hope in our ultimate reward reminds us that whatever comes to us comes by the hand of our creator who loves us and will give to us out of that love.

Hope reinforces gratitude because it turns us back to God and reminds us of who God is and the good God longs to do through and for us.

Hope & Whims:

Hope protects us against whims, against society's changing preferences, which so deeply influence our own. It reminds us of what is certain and what should be depended upon and where our resources should be directed--because of course, if God is the one who provides for us all our good, if we can hope that God will provide for us in the future, and rejoice when we does, then what I need isn't whatever seems

important right now. What I need is God to come through for me. And hope, if it does anything at all, opens our eyes to look for the coming-through of God, his faithfulness and love for us.

Hopes Demands:

But hope, as we know, demands things from us. It demands that we remember the things we usually forget. It demands that we reject disbelief, and abandon our manipulative strivings, our clever deceptions, to God.

Hope demands that we make less of ourselves in this moment of our need, and make more of God and who God is and has been: ready, prepared, to be faithful, to make good of our troubles, to see us through to the next landing place, even as He busies himself preparing to make a final home of this world where all troubles end.

Hope Reveals:

And hope reveals that where our trust lies, what it is we truly depend on. If we list out those “if only’s”--the somedays, and the “when this happens, then’s,” if we do that, we’ll discover where our hope lies--and it’s usually not in God’s continued faithfulness to care for

us. It's in the new job we've been looking to to solve all our troubles, it's in that one behavior we want someone else to do that we think they should do, that one political or economic environment that we want to see created.

Or it's in having, in owning, controlling.

Ultimately, hope demands that we let what we experience and who we're in relationship with be simply what they are and nothing else. When we hope in our bank accounts, instead of God's faithfulness, or hope in some relationship, we are saying, in effect, that this thing's permanence, it's presence in our lives, is the thing that will in the future give us joy, and peace, and a sense of purpose and importance and value.

But only God can provide those things, because only God is the one who will never leave nor forsake us. Only Jesus, who showed up in love and showed his love for us will never let us down--Jesus, who by the Spirit revealed the Father fully.

And hope is, if it's anything, security. It's what keeps us going when going seems like a stupid thing to do. If we don't hope in God, we're not "bad Christians," or

bad people, or failures, or anything like that.

We're simply adrift, without resource in this world that will pass away, and with it our memories, our legacies, our bank accounts, and all the marks we make on it. When the poet wrote "O, Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem" he wasn't writing advice. He was writing truth. God is the one who can trade any trouble in the present or fear for the future for peace, love--even joy.

Hope reveals where our trust is. Is it in the God who is coming through for us even in the midst of our troubles, is making good, is active and working on our behalf even in our sorrow? Our hope for the present and our hope for the future depend on the faithful God who will never give us up. All he asks is that we hold out, even if its shaky and hesitating and weak, our hand for him to close his around.

I pray that our hope can be in the Lord this Advent season: in his presence with us, and his return. If it's anywhere else, we're liable to lose, if not ourselves, anything like contentment or peace. I pray we can remind ourselves like the psalmist reminded himself,

pray like he prayed, so long before God made good on his and the prophets hope,

...the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.

We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you. (Psalm 33:18-22 NIV)

Let's put our hope back in the Lord if it's been placed somewhere else, and receive it as the gift it is, until Jesus returns.