

## All I want for Christmas is HOPE

Preached the Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2007

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Text: Isaiah 40:28-31

Theme: Hope is not wishful thinking or wimpy desiring, it is forward looking, promise filled, leading to a new future while transforming the present.

I heard a story about a woman who had her dog disappear for a few days and she was upset beyond belief. She put up signs on all the poles in the area, hung pictures in the local windows of the grocery stores, and took out an ad in the local paper.

The day the ad appeared her phone rang and a weak, cracking voice began, "I'm calling about your dog." The caller coughed and cleared her voice a few times. Then she began explaining that she didn't feel all that well and that she really hadn't felt that well since her husband died three years ago. From the dreary story of her husband's death she jumped to the fact that her parents had also recently died and that her sister who was in a state of depression had just been diagnosed with a fatal ailment. The woman was on a roll. She then broke into stories about her friends who had come down with all sorts of strange and incurable maladies and that she was going to one funeral after another.

Finally after 30 minutes of listening, sympathizing, and even offering tips on how to get some help, the dog owner cleverly steered the conversation back to the original subject. "You were saying about my dog," she began.

"Oh, oh yes," the caller replied, "I don't have him. I just thought I would call to bring you some hope and to cheer you up."

Have you ever had someone try to cheer you up or give you hope and you wished in the end that they had kept all of their goodness to themselves? Hope is a strange and elusive concept in a world that seems so dark and despairing. Too often we misunderstand hope and pass it off as wishful thinking, daydreams, false optimism, or "let go let God" attitudes. When Jürgen Moltmann wrote an entire book about hope he was strongly criticized for "cultivating a lot of futuristic happy talk that ignored present realities and past experiences and postponed everything to an escapist time of fulfillment."<sup>1</sup> Critics said his hope was giving hope a bad name.

Think of the ways we use the concept of hope. We hope that it won't snow this week so we can make it back and forth to work. We hope we get a raise, or sell our house, or get a new job. We hope that won't get audited this year by the IRS. But this is a misuse of the theological virtue of hope. This kind of wishful thinking makes hope wimpy and authentic hope is anything but wimpy. "Hope is meant to be a word of strength and not weakness, of anticipation and not hesitation."<sup>2</sup> But what are we anticipating? A new job? A future raise? A year without a visit from the IRS?

Simply put our hope is in God. Our hope springs forth from the certain knowledge that each of us are "children of God" and that God is wooing, drawing, and inviting us back into an intimate relationship with him. Hope comes from simple phrases locked deep in prayers like, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." Hope does not come as a byproduct of human endeavor but as a promise from God that God will not fail to eventually bring righteousness, justice, grace, and salvation to his children.

Hope is a journey towards God BUT ALSO WITH God. It is trusting so much in God and God's future promise that our present is transformed. Doesn't that fit with Advent? We know that through the Christ child, God has broken through and given us a glimpse of the future kingdom and that if we just trust that child we can start to live a kingdom life right now.

Let me give you two examples from the Old Testament about false hope and then future oriented, authentic hope. The first example comes from the story of the Exodus. The Israelites have just escaped Egypt and are headed out to the desert. This should be a time of great rejoicing and of hope in a new and wonderful future. But what happens when they encounter their first obstacle? There they are with the Red Sea blocking their forward progress and the Pharaoh's chariots bearing down on them from behind. They start whining and complaining. "Were it not for the lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us out into the desert to die?"

Let us go back they yell. Let us go back to wishing and daydreaming about a better future rather than trusting in God to bring one into being. Hope invites us to journey with God to places we don't know and have never been. Hope invites us to engage the injustice of our world, to fight for God's Kingdom here and now, because we are so confident that it will come in the future. Hope is like taking residence and moving in to God's home before the walls have been erected because we have seen the foundation.

There was a song written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson entitled, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." It is sometimes referred to as the "Black National Anthem" because it was written and embraced primarily by the African American people and never found much acceptance until lately in white hymnals. Johnson wrote it when African Americans were still being discriminated against, when they were not welcome in white communities, where they ate in different places and were considered a threat to white America. Johnson considered this a hymn of hope – not false hope, not whining, complaining hope, but authentic-God-would-transform-the-future-so-let's-begin-to-live-that-way-right-now-hope.

The first verse goes like this:

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
let your rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a new song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

Johnson recognized the past with all of its injustice, violence, and sin but he would not stay there. He looked to a future where God's kingdom would break in and victory would be won. This song went unnoticed by white America for years but in most African American schools at the start of every day the Bible was read, the pledge was given, and then this song was sung.

Hope is believing so much in God's future promise that it gives strength to live today. Let me tell you another Old Testament story that involves our reading this morning. The Israelites have been taken from their homes in Jerusalem, their sacred city has been destroyed, they have been in exile for years in Babylon, and now they have paid their price and are going home. This could be a defeated, despairing nation that could easily spend its time cursing God, but listen to the words of Isaiah.

"Those who wait upon the Lord (or another way of putting it is those who put their hope in the Lord) shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with the wings of eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." These are words of promise! We shall have our strength renewed. These are words of hope! We shall soar like eagles, run and not get tired, walk and not faint. These are words of journey with God and to God.

There is a secret to those words that is only revealed in living them out. It was first revealed to me by an author named John Claypool who turned to them when his young daughter was dying of leukemia. I shared this story with you a long time ago so I will condense it for you this morning. Claypool, who was a pastor, had always read the passage seeking the first image – mounting the winds on wings of eagles. When he prayed for his daughter it was for a “soaring like an eagle miracle.”

The miracle didn't come and most times in our lives we know the miracles we pray for so desperately don't come. Cancer still ravages, accidents still happen, and floods still come. What he learned as he turned to that passage for his hope was that God promised two other things. God would be there when he was ready to run again but he was there right now when he could barely shuffle his feet and walk. That is the beauty of hope. In the most hopeless of times hope seems to be strongest. In times when we can barely shuffle our feet God gives us strength to continue to walk and not faint.

Hope leads us out of the darkness and strengthens us to do things we didn't think possible. It reminds me of a story about a man who had been out partying too long one night and decided to take a short cut through a cemetery and you guessed it he fell into an open grave.

He tried and tried to climb out but the walls were too steep and slippery and he kept falling back over and over again until he finally gave up in exhaustion and decided to wait for morning light. Well lo and behold a few minutes later another man came walking along and he fell into the same grave. He did the same thing as the first man with the same amount of success and he too finally gave up in desperation.

As he hung his head in hopeless resignation the first man whispered, “You'll never get out of here.” He was wrong. He did! Sometimes all we need are the right words to lift us out of our darkness and give us hope.

Hope provides the promise of a better future that transforms the way we live in the present. It lifts us out of our darkness and gives us the strength to walk and not fall over. Let me tell you a story from this past week that illustrates this point perfectly.

As you have been watching the news you know that our sisters and brothers to the south have been through a great deal with heavy rains, floods, and mudslides. After worship on Sunday Dave Sanford got a bug to gather a few people and go down and try to help. So Monday morning four of us went down to Chehalis to see what we could do. We went to a rescue station and were told to go to a remote rescue station in Doty which we found an hour or so later with the help of some of the locals. While driving to the official station we passed dozens upon dozens of homes surrounded or buried in mud. When we got to that station they told us and four other workers to go back to the banks of the Chehalis where we had just been and to go to a certain home that needed work.

The unfortunate part was that when we arrived to work there were already several workers from Americorp and the county and the houses were not that damaged. So we mucked mud for a couple hours and we collectively agreed to go to another place. Again we tried to stay within official channels but we couldn't find the rescue station so we decided to let someone else make the call – we trusted God. We drove back along the same road that we had now crossed at least four times and saw some homes close to the river's edge that looked like they were surrounded in mud. We took our trucks down this slippery, silt encrusted road and I jumped out to talk to a man I thought might be the owner of the house.

His name was Billy. His house had at one time been perfectly perched 30 plus feet above the Chehalis River on a scenic bend that one day must have been magnificent. He bought the house three years ago and it was going to be his retirement home. When we came walking up to Billy he and a

couple of men from the county were cleaning out his water tank which had washed away and was located a quarter mile downriver. He was standing in silt, surrounded by debris, and on two metal crutches. Billy had been in a traffic accident many years ago and had broken his back and was now a paraplegic.

I asked if we could help in any way and you would have thought that I had come to give him a million dollars. "Do whatever you think you need to do," he said. There was a lot to do. During the heavy rainstorm hillsides and groves of trees had collapsed upstream and had formed dams against bridges all the way down. One by one the bridges collapsed and a wall of water filled with logs and debris came shooting down the valley. This 30+ foot tall wall of water hit his house. The only thing that saved his house from being washed completely away was a stand of trees right in front of his deck that collected some of the logs at just the right angle to create another small dam, so instead of just destroying the house by force the water lifted it on the foundation and filled it with 6-9 inches of mud.

Dave Sanford, Lane Dreher, Ted Snyder and I tried to clean that house. Someone had already been in and removed the first layer of mud but there was still more, much more. We started working on the kitchen cabinets and gave up. The deeper we dug the more we realized that even the floorboards were contaminated. We went to Billy to tell him the bad news. It was just one more loss. He took us to his garage where all of his tools were stored in beautiful Craftsman tool chests. As he opened each drawer it looked like he was opening an oven door filled with fudge.

We cleaned, cleared, and tried to help him come up with a plan for the future. He was in shock and wasn't able to process everything that was going on. He was in one of those stumbling places in life. I met him in his front yard as he was looking at all the destruction. As he looked across his yard, which was once a park-like setting and was now covered with mud and debris, I told him I was a pastor and was preaching on hope this weekend. I asked, "Where do you find hope in moments like this?"

I will never forget his answer. He looked at me trying to hold back his tears and said, "Hope comes in answered prayer." He hesitated and fought back his tears and then continued, "This morning I was lost and didn't know what to do. I prayed for people to come to help me but I kept looking up to the road and it seemed like everyone just kept driving by. Then you four drove in and you gave me hope."

Billy will not be soaring with eagles for a long while and the possibility of him ever running and not growing weary are remote. But for right now God gave him the strength to simply shuffle in the mud and not faint. "Hope comes in answered prayer."

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Gomes, "The Good Life: Truths that Last in Times of Need," Harper Collins, San Francisco, 2002, p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> Gomes, p. 286.