

“Hope”

Lamentations 3:21-26; Isaiah 54:7-10;  
Romans 4:16-22; Luke 1:67-80

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Today we begin Advent, preparing for the coming of Christ. We come into this new season, and a new season always brings a sense of hope. So today we think about what hope is. I realize that sometimes I use the word “hope” like I would use “wish.” Is something going to happen? I hope so. It is my wish.

What I was interested in as I was looking at the Greek word for “hope” is that it’s not quite so wishy-washy about the future. It’s not just a wish. It contains a certainty. A certainty in a promise or a thought that the good will come. What we expect might really happen. It’s my sense that oftentimes we struggle a little bit with those expectations. We can build up false hopes. But there is a real hope that comes through our faith. This season invites us into that hope.

Sometimes it’s hard to recognize where hope might be coming from. It was in the Romans passage where it talks about Abraham hoping against hope. In the midst of Abraham’s situation there was much that gave him a great deal of hope. He and his wife were getting older. They were getting to the age when most people wouldn’t hope of having children. So, he was hoping against hope by believing the promise that God had given him. That’s what Paul is pointing to in that Romans passage—having a confident expectation in spite of the struggles, the uncertainties, the fear that the promise would not come to fruition.

I think oftentimes we begin to hope by looking at something else. Abraham was looking at the promise he was given and that’s what gave him hope. Sometimes we look back and see something we think will come to fruition and that will give us hope. This last week we were invited to give thanks for something—to give thanks for our lives and the gifts that we have received. I think whenever we can give thanks there is a seed of hope. It is in recognizing something good – a grace, a gift, a relationship, a sense of being loved, a moment of forgiveness – all these things are seeds of hope.

There’s a story in scripture of a fellow who was a priest, and he lived in a time when the people weren’t necessarily that hopeful. There was still a grasp on hope, but they were going through a time of difficulty. They were overrun by the Romans, wondering what life would bring. It was his turn to be the priest at the Temple, so he would go and make sure everything was all right in the Holy of Holies, the place in the center where they thought God’s presence was, and keep the light burning. It is said that sometimes when the priest would go in, they would tie a rope around his leg in case something happened in there in the presence of God. Nobody else wanted to go in because of the fear of being in the presence, so they put the rope around him in case they had to pull him out so that nobody had to go in.

Even so, I wonder if after a while with very little happening, these priests thought God was present somehow, but they never quite noticed. When Zach went in that day and a messenger from God began to speak to him, I would have thought he would have been flabbergasted and just taken in all in. The messenger tells him that he's going to have a child and they should name him John and he would be the one who shows the way for the coming of the Lord. He might have said, "Wonderful! That's what we've hoped for." That's not quite what he said. He said, "I'm too old! How's that going to happen?" I love this part of the story because it feels like the angel has some human characteristics. The angel says, "I've come all this way and you don't believe me? Then you won't speak until the baby is born."

That's what happens, and Zechariah is mute until the moment the child is born and they try to name him. The people say, "You should name him Zechariah." Elizabeth says, "No, he should be named John." So, they go to the father and ask what they will name him. Zechariah asks for something to write with, and he writes out "His name will be John." At that point his voice comes back. It is at that moment when his voice comes back that he is able to give us this prophecy that we read today. In doing so, I think he begins to give us the shape, the nature of the hope of Advent.

He gives an overview of what might happen, but then he talks about the nature of Advent, the nature of that hope. John, his son, John the Baptist, will be the prophet that announces the coming of a savior, preparing the way of the Lord. The idea that a prophet, somebody speaking for God, will come is part of the nature of Advent hope. God speaks into our lives through the prophets and we will gain the knowledge of salvation. We will know something new, something different about how to be well, how to be whole, how to be saved. That word "salvation" is often thought about as "rescue" but it really points back to the root of being saved from disease (which often meant death in those days), so it's a rescue from death and disease, becoming well and whole.

He says it's going to be through or by the forgiveness of sins. That's an interesting way for knowledge to come, by experiencing forgiveness. It's an invitation to recognize that our hope comes through a knowledge given us through the experience of forgiveness. To know we are loved in a way in which we are able to experience that forgiveness. The concerns of our life and the ways we don't think we can relate to God are taken away. The separation is removed. So, we have the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins "by the tender mercy of God," by the very character of God. Isaiah talks a lot about the compassion of God.

It is by the nature of God that we have hope because God cares for God's people, so we might have hope. Light will be given to us so that we might see our way and be guided in the way of peace. The hope that's provided is that we will be guided into the way of peace. We think about peace as the generic way of describing the world the way God would have it be and have us be in it. The way it was created for us. It was the idea of shalom, of being in harmony, of living well, of abundant new life. It's all because of the character of God. Isaiah talks about this character as the everlasting love of God.

Going back to Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones is a strange thing to do in the midst of a sermon on a Hanging of the Greens Sunday, but we've been reading it when we have committee meetings of the Presbytery. One of the things that struck me about it was the idea of hope in this story. God was going to take a valley of dry bones and repopulate it, bring it to life. What I found fascinating about that is that when God was going through that process, Ezekiel asks how it can happen and God tells him, "Just prophesy, and I'll make it happen." My question was why does Ezekiel have to prophesy? God could have done it on his own. It seems that God continually engages us in what God does. Even though God was going to bring life to those dry bones, he wanted Ezekiel to announce it before God went ahead.

Think about the hope God gives us. A prophet to speak into our lives is a way God comes among us as a human being, engaging humanity in the very thing God is doing. He's giving us new knowledge, a new experience of forgiveness. We don't have to be separated from God, but through forgiveness of sins based on a relationship of mercy and compassion, we are guided into the way of peace because of God's everlasting love.

When we expect God to enter the world, I often am one who would like to see God change it all, and yet, this whole story is one of God entering in and bringing light to help us see anew—a new knowledge, new experience, new opportunity of guidance. What I begin to realize is that as God enters our world in Jesus Christ, God comes and walks among us. God doesn't change the world; God comes to be part of the world. God comes and teaches us and invites us into a new way of living and into abundant life, but he doesn't change the very nature of the world. Rather, he invites us to participate in a different way.

What I realized when I began thinking about this hope is that I often have a hope and an expectation that probably isn't quite founded in what God wants to give me. I want God to do something and be able to sit back and accept it. God is saying, "No, your hope is in the life you have, the life you've been given. You get to live into the way of peace. I'm going to be with you. I'm going to come and guide you. I'm going to show you the way. I'm going to give you light, but you're going to have to walk." It's engaging us. It's not leaving us sitting. It's inviting us to get up and participate in what God is doing. To live into the good news. To live as people of Christ. To live into the way of peace. Amen.