

“Hope Is On The Way”

Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

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First of all, I want to thank Phyllis’s family to light the first Advent candle. It was a candle of hope. I also appreciate again our worship committee and volunteers who set up Advent wreath and Sanctuary decoration. During the season of Advent, we will light one candle each Sunday waiting for the Messiah’s coming as a part of the Advent services.

A Sunday school teacher wanted to see what the children remembered about Advent season devotions the year before on the second week of Advent. “Who can tell me what the four candles in the Advent wreath represent?” She asked. Luke jumped in with seven-year-old wisdom and exuberance. “There’s love, joy, peace and ... and....” “I know!” six-year-old Elise interrupted to finish her brother’s sentence: “Peace and quiet!” If you are not sure what the season of Advent is all about, just remember these four words for the meaning of Jesus Christ’s coming to us in this Advent season! This morning, we will explore the meaning of hope. What does it mean that we have hope in Christian faith? Why do we patiently long for hope as we anticipating our Messiah, Christ Jesus?

I want to be clear with the meaning of “hope” In the English dictionary, hope means “an optimistic attitude of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes related to events and circumstances in one's life.”¹ But in Christian faith, the concept of hope has more deep and profound spiritual meanings. The word, “Advent” means “coming or arrival.” Whereas another word, future simply indicates a later time following the moment of speaking now, Advent involves our desperate longing and desire with anticipating like a special gift’s coming down towards us. In our Christian faith, Jesus Christ himself is a gift of hope! We do not produce this gift of hope, but we find this special hope in Christ Jesus. So we can’t wait for his arrival and Christmas day can’t come fast enough! Why is hope so important and essential in our faith and life? Because it helps us be bold and keep moving forward our life journeys no matter challenges and hardships are ahead of us. Early Christians had no doubt that Jesus Christ was their hope and Messiah so they could endure hardships and sufferings in the severe persecution hiding in the catacombs. If we have hope, we can be still joyful in the midst of despair and be hopeful even in all the worst circumstances. Hope is a spiritual aspiration and confidence that hasn’t happened yet, but we believe it is already happening in our heart!

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope> Accessed Nov. 25 2016

In 1843, a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled, "Fear and Tremble". This book describes our human being's fear and anxiety through a story of Abraham. One day, God tested Abraham by calling him to take his only son, Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering on the mountain. God's purpose was not to have Isaac killed. We need to remember this; Abraham had a *choice* to complete the task or to forget it. But he resigned himself to the three and a half day journey and to the loss of his son. "He said nothing to Sarah, his wife, Who, after all, could understand him. He split the firewood, he bound Isaac, he lit the fire, he drew the knife." Because he kept everything to himself in hiddenness he "isolated himself as higher than the universal." Kierkegaard envisions two types of people in this book. One lives in *hope*, Abraham, the other lives in *memory*. We all humans have fear and anxieties in ourselves. In a sense, anxiety and fear are natural and essential components of who we are. God's order to kill his loving son, Isaac is a great example of fear inside us. You may challenge God's intention why He was brutal to Abraham and his family? The three and a half day journey can present our life journey. Abraham's three day and a half day journey is a metaphor of our own fears and anxieties in it. Abraham symbolizes hope because he trusted in God. We want to be like Abraham who lives in hope.

Søren Kierkegaard directly asks you to choose your side and challenge each of us to choose our final choice whether you decide to take hope as your gift for your life or not. Every year Christmas is coming back and we church celebrates the season of Advent. Our chancel choir has been planning and rehearsing Advent concert and we will celebrate Christmas Eve service and Christmas service with communion on the 25th Sunday morning. What is this all about? The Advent season should neither a yearly routine nor be your annual seasonal ritual. Rather this season should be your personal spiritual pause for longing for hope as your intentional choice to receive Jesus Christ. Hope is another name of God and incarnated in Christ Jesus as a special gift for all of us.

Rev. Dr. Thomas Long, a professor at Candler school of Theology in Emory University shares Mary Lou Weisman's moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from the terrible disease, muscular dystrophy from her book, "Intensive Care" and explains what hope means in our Christian faith. Mary tells us about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of her son's death. She writes:

Peter's body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, "sounded so far away, so lost." But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. “Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death.²

Rev. Dr. Thomas challenges us to think about the essential nature of Christian hope. He argues that Christian hope is a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of death. He tells that Christian hope is not something sweet and mild. It’s not wishful thinking such as for saying “I hope it doesn’t rain this weekend or I hope the economy gets better soon.” He writes:

Christian hope is not even about progress, the hope that human ingenuity will bring in a brighter tomorrow. Those may be good hopes, but when Christians use the word hope, they mean something different by it. Christian hope is the faith that in a world of violence and warfare and suffering, that none of these things has the last word. That over against all of the visible evidence, love is finally stronger than hate, that life will prevail over death ... This means that Christian hope puts us in a kind of “impudent position” over against the powers of destruction in the world.³

The season of Advent has come again this year. Take this season of God’s special invitation for you to be a person of hope. God offers His own life in His son Jesus Christ as a gift of hope. Simply *you* need to be *in* the hope of God. Why don’t you gladly accept Christ Jesus as “the gift of unending presence of God” to be your “impudent hope”. Go boldly on your life with this hope!

² An excerpt from Rev. Dr. Thomas Long’s sermon, “A Living Hope” Program #5217, First broadcast February 1, 2009

³ Ibid.