I remember when our oldest son, Zachary, was about three years old. We were living then in Maynard, MN, and as a relatively new pastor I would often on a Saturday evening go up to our church in town and practice my sermon for Sunday. At that time in my ministry I would go into the sanctuary and practice by actually preaching the sermon from the pulpit.

One Saturday evening I asked Zachary if he would like to go with me. Well, when he heard this he got all excited. He started saying, “I’m going to go up to church with my Daddy and I’m going to sit real quietly in the stink. I’m going to sit in the stink real nice.”

When Kim and I heard his enthusiasm we started to ask him what he meant by saying he was going to sit in the “stink.” We tried to figure out why he was using that word. Then it dawned on us…the word “pew.” When we changed his diaper we often said, “p.u.” So he was going to sit real quietly in the “stink,” in the pew.

When I think of children I often think of hope. In fact, as I see many children at worship here at Messiah each week I am filled with lots of hope and joy. For children have a way of pointing us to the future. They remind us that there is new life; that through God’s grace life continues on from generation to generation.

When I was a pastor back in the 80’s at Zion Lutheran in Litchfield our worship services each Sunday were both on the local radio station and on cable TV. Once in awhile, as I visited some of our shut-ins, they would comment about how a baby or young child was pretty loud in the service the week before; that this noise had disrupted their ability to hear part of the service.

My response to these people was always something like, “When you hear a baby or child making noise in the service I want you to pray a prayer of thanks to our God. The truth is that there are churches all over our area and country who are dying because they have very few or no younger people.” Children, like all the children we are blessed with here at Messiah, along with the growing numbers of younger couples and families, are a sign of hope and life for our church.

It has often been said that the church of Jesus Christ is always only one generation away from extinction. That is why our church at Messiah is putting extra money, staff time and support into Charis’ Youth & Worship Ministry.

It is why our worship always needs to be blended with the old and new; it needs to be welcoming for people of differing church background along with no church background at all; it needs to be young and old person friendly, relevant and filled with life. Our call is to pass on and nurture faith in children, youth, young adults, middle age, older people, singles and families, so that each generation may know the life-changing love of Jesus.
(It is interesting that our denomination’s statistics state that children’s enrollment in Sunday School is down 62% from 1990 to 2010; worship is down 55%; membership is losing hundreds of thousands of people each year. Yet some say what’s the use?—I want worship done the traditional way I like. Some pastors say—People will still come back to these traditions; we can’t give into how the growing churches are doing it; yes we need to change but not robes, liturgy, music, structures, or my ordination power. Yet with this the decline will grow.)

This morning we continue our Walk Through the Bible by focusing on an Old Testament prophet of hope named Isaiah. Isaiah, of course, is the prophet who some 700 years before the birth of Jesus foretells the truth that God would send his Son, our Savior, to this world.

If you have ever studied about what life was like in the generations leading up to Jesus’ birth, you know that the world was filled with lots of darkness, chaos and struggle. I have thought many times through the years about how awful it would have been to have lived in those times.

The way of life centered around multiple wars between various nations and people. Lands and possessions were often violently snatched from them. Droughts, famines and other pestilence often destroyed their crops and they were left with no food. Their government leaders were most often corrupt military leaders; most of the time they didn’t know who to trust.

For literally hundreds of years the people lived in the darkness of a world filled with hopelessness and despair. In their pain they often cried out to God to save them. It was into this turmoil that Isaiah prophesied that God would one day send a Savior, the Messiah, the Christ. He says that “a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse…the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and power.” (11:1-2)

You may remember how in Matthew’s Gospel John the Baptist sends his messengers from prison to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” They had waited in hope and anticipation for so many years; John wanted to know if their hopes were finally fulfilled. Jesus is the hope of all the years.

And today, many centuries later, our hope and life is still centered in the coming of this baby, this child Jesus. Jesus is truly Emmanuel, God with us; he is our Savior and Lord; he is the one who came to give us life in abundance. The hopes and fears of all the years are still met in him today.

Hope. Hope is such an important ingredient for each of us. In fact, studies have found that when someone loses hope they are often more vulnerable to hurtful behavior. For example when a young person loses hope, when they feel as if they cannot set any goals for their future, it is then that they may be especially vulnerable to drugs, gangs, other kinds of destructive behavior. Hopelessness is often considered a major influence in inner city and rural youth problems.

When people lose their hopes and dreams for their life or marriage, it is then that they are often vulnerable to simply give up. When people have reached certain goals and successes, yet in their mid-life crisis they are searching for something with deeper meaning, some have been known to sacrifice spouse, family, job and even friends to quote, “find themselves.”
My friends, it is into our challenging and troubled world today that Jesus continues to bring his promises of hope and new life. He brings us his forgiveness, healing and love which can bring new life back to people and relationships. It is in Jesus where we are given that amazing vision that each of our lives has a much larger purpose and meaning. He shows us that true life and fulfillment is found in giving ourselves in love to make a positive difference in this world.

Through the years people have often asked me how I have been able to minister to people in the midst of tragedies, illness, loss and hurt. Some have wondered if dealing with people’s problems, pain, anger, and crisis—if that doesn’t sometimes defeat or drag me down. Now I’d be lying if I didn’t say that sometimes this discourages and drag me down—this year was especially difficult for me in the death of Paul Stark, my mother, and other tragedies at Messiah.

Yet what I can respond is that in my sadness, discouragements and frustrations, my hope in Jesus is still stronger than these negative forces or emotions. The hope and belief I cling to is that our God can heal any pain; he can bring new life out of tragedies; he can bring hope in the midst of sickness; he can bring forgiveness out of anger.

Hope in Jesus, I believe, is the only hope and answer for our world of sin, discouragement and darkness. Even in the face of death, Jesus is our only hope. Only Jesus gives us the true and solid assurance of resurrection and life everlasting; only he has won the victory over death so that all who believe in him can share in that victory.

My friends, I don’t know how people live in this tumultuous world today without this hope in Jesus. I don’t know how people can cope with tragedies and hurt without faith in Jesus. Yet in looking around our community, area and world, the truth is that lots of people and families are not coping very well—and it is getting worse.

Drugs like alcohol, methamphetamines, heroin and painkillers are on the increase. Pornography as an escape is at epidemic proportions. Lavish and me centered spending and lifestyles try to drown out the needs of others as well as one’s own emptiness. Blaming others for our problems is a way of avoiding our own insecurities and deeper issues.

It is true that without hope in Jesus we run away from people and problems. Without hope in Jesus we run to narcissistic religions; to experiences where pleasing me is the center. Without hope in Jesus we feel empty in our hearts, in our meaning, in our purpose. The happiness promises of this world are always empty.

That is why I believe with all my heart that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the hope in our hurting world. It is why I believe with all my heart that Messiah and our Bible-centered mission for Jesus is of ultimate and eternal importance. God has called us to be his ambassadors, to be his beacon of light, to be his center of hope.

My friends, when I look around my heart cries out for all the children and youth who are not being raised in Christian homes. My heart cries out for all the young adults and young couples who are thinking they can live by themselves without this hope of Jesus in their hearts. My heart cries out in that I pray that each person may come to know Jesus in a personal way.
John said to Jesus, “Are you the one, or should we wait for another?” Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies; he is the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams for all our years.