

All is Calm: 1. Hope
Isaiah 9:1-7
December 1, 2019
Pastor Steve Richards

If someone were to ask you, "What are you hoping for?" What would you say? Maybe something that you hope will end up under the Christmas tree. Or maybe it's at work – some promotion or project or maybe you're just hoping to keep your job. Or maybe it's a relationship. Or it's a broken one or one that you don't have. Maybe it's about your health or the health of someone you love.

We're all hopers. When we are young, we hope for parents who will love us and friends who will care about us. We hope to make the team. We hope to get into a good school and make good grades. Then, we hope to get out of school and with little or no debt. Then, maybe we hope to get into a house. Then, maybe to get married and then fill that house with children. Then, once you get kids in the house, you hope you get the kids out of the house. That can be a big hope, too. You hope to get a job. Then, you hope to retire from that job. Then, what do you hope for? It's a strange thing about us. We outgrow a lot of stuff, but nobody outgrows hope. You never get too old for hope. Some eras tend to be more hope-filled than other eras. If you know your US history, you may know about this. After the United States won the War of 1812 against England, there was such a strong sense of purpose and shared national unity that historians have called the years 1812 to 1825 as the era of good feelings. What do you think historians will call this era we're in right now? Political divisiveness? The gap between wealthy and poor?

There are a lot of indications that we're actually facing a shortage of hope. Recently, the Center for Disease Control noted that we've gone through three years where the average life expectancy in this country has declined. That has not happened for more than a century, and it's not because of heart disease, and it's not because of cancer. Those deaths are down. The causes of death that are soaring are drug abuse, opioid crisis, alcohol-related deaths, and suicide, and these are being called the *diseases of despair*. It's a phrase first coined by economists from Princeton. In the last 20 years, fatalities to these causes that you might think of as despair deaths have almost tripled. We are dying of hopelessness. In Western societies, the rates of marriage and birth rates are declining, and sociologists say it's because there is a lack of hope. Is this the kind of world we want to bring children into? It's a question of hope.

There's also this strange paradox about hope. You can hope for something, and you get it, and only to realize, "It's not at all what I had hoped it was." Tim Keller quoted a New York columnist who had known a lot of people like Sylvester Stallone and Julia Roberts back when they were obscure, and she said that a lot of people come to a place like New York to make it big, and of course, most of them don't. A few of them do. A few of them get the success they were looking for, but it didn't bring the peace they were hoping for. Here's what she wrote: *"One of the funny things was that after they got famous, if anything, they were more unhappy, angry, and mean than they had been before, because that giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything okay and was going to provide them with fulfillment and happiness, had happened, and nothing changed. They were still them."* That's a great line. "They were still them." That's their problem. And it's ours as well.

So, what are we to do? We can't give up. When I don't get the thing I'm really hoping for and when I realize I'm never going to get the thing I'm hoping for, what do I put my hope in? Hope *in*, that's where our scripture points us this morning. It's not hope for but what will you hope in?

Hope in is an anchor. Hope in is what keeps you going when you've lost what you were hoping for.

Isaiah is living in Jerusalem in 740 BC, and he is writing to people living in Jerusalem – in the southern kingdom of Judah – and he's warning the people. He says, turn to God and do what is right and just and God will protect you. Turn away from God and his ways, follow the pagan gods who were doing unjust things – hurting each other and not caring for the poor – and God will removed his protection from you and at a time when horrible things are about to happen. Where are you going to put your hope? The army of the Assyrian Empire was gathering on the northern border, and they were heading toward Jerusalem. The Assyrian Empire was one of the great Empires in history that existed for 1900 years. Sometimes it was doing good and sometimes it was doing evil. Sometimes it was strong, and sometimes it was weak. But by the time of Isaiah, the Assyrian Empire was experiencing a resurgence, led by king Tiglath-Pilaser III who was considered a great military leader. Later, his grandson Sargon II entered the northern kingdom of Israel, captured the people, took them back to Assyrian, spread them across the kingdom where they were forced to intermarry which put an end to their religion and identity. They were lost forever. And now that same army is on the northern border of Judah.

This was happening as Isaiah speaks: **Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted.** Isaiah is saying, there is still hope. **At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations.** This was a region surrounding the Sea of Galilee where it once seemed hopeless but now there is hope. **The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.** In other words, just when it seemed they were beyond hope there was a light in the midst of the darkness. And how can Isaiah be so confident that there is hope, that light will shine for the people? **A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.** Scholars have looked to these words and say that in his day, Isaiah, was announcing the birth of King Hezekiah, who would be the king to bring about reforms and lead people to better times. But after Isaiah's death, the Assyrian Empire was defeated by the Babylonian Empire that came and destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah and the people of Jerusalem were carried away as slaves to the Babylonians. And when that happened, people went back to Isaiah's words and said, "Look what Isaiah said – those in darkness will see a great light and unto us a child is born..." And they said, there must still be hope for us. And fifty years later, that hope became reality because they were allowed to go back to the Promised Land.

But then 200 years later, Greeks conquered the land, and the people went back to Isaiah's words and once again found hope for their generation. They were people living in darkness and a light would come. And then later, it was the Egyptians who conquered the land and then the Syrians, and finally the Romans at the time of Jesus. Just before the birth of Jesus with the oppressive occupying force from Rome, the people turned again to Isaiah, and their hope was renewed – a king would come. And forty years after the death of Jesus, the gospel writer Matthew tells us that after his baptism, Jesus returns to the area of Galilee (once Zebulun and Naphtali) and Matthew says, well of course, Jesus is the one of whom Isaiah was writing. And how did Jesus bring hope – he had compassion for the sick; he cast out the demons of oppression; he offered forgiveness and mercy; he opened the eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf – and in so doing, he was saying, there is always hope. There is a light, even in the darkness. Jesus embodied that light which was announced throughout human history. The one thing that every empire of the past shared was that they eventually fell. They may have prevailed for a time, but ultimately they all fell.

On Christmas Eve, we remember this with candlelight and carols. We turn out all the lights – only one light, the light of Christ remains – and we begin singing Silent Night. But it wasn't really a silent night that first Christmas. My grandson is four months old and he's only slept through the night one time. My daughter tells me, the nights with Basil are anything but silent. Mary and Joseph were far from home – and where did they spend the night? In a cave where the cattle were kept at night. And we sing "all is calm, all is bright?" What was Joseph Mohr thinking when he wrote that song? What he was thinking which is what we are doing on Christmas Eve is proclaiming that even in the darkness, all is bright. Even in a noisy and chaotic world, all is calm. And over the next few weeks, we will see how that is possible in our lives. Hope in – hope in that child of Bethlehem who would be the Savior of the world - is what keeps you going when you've lost what you were hoping for.

And on Christmas Eve, we take this light and pass it throughout this room. As each candle is lit, you are saying, I want this light. I want to be a light bearer. I want to be part of pushing back the darkness and bringing hope to this world. And when we get to the final verse of Silent Night and hold up our candles – we are attaching ourselves to Jesus' plan. We hope in the one person who came to show us what it means to have hope and to be light and then we commit ourselves to taking this hope/light into the world. And that's when suddenly, the lights come on and we start singing "Joy to the World."

You can live, if you want, for your achievements and your accomplishments or your security or your possessions or your job or your money. You can hope for a new house or a new car or a new diploma or a new relationship. There was a time when people put their hope in the Assyrian Empire – lasted 1900 years – and then it didn't. This is the season when we ask – what will you hope in that will never fail. And you can bring this hope, this light into the world.

Last summer, a child arrived at Bloom, our child care ministry in this building. He lives with his grandparents, and his grandmother's call to the Bloom office was frantic. Just 4 years old and already her grandson had been expelled from another child care center because of behavioral issues. What do you do when you are told that your precious child – just four years old is beyond hope? Bloom had a space available and scholarship funds and the child was welcomed here. He transitioned smoothly, developing relationships with staff who were present every day – staff who focused on the trauma that was behind the behavioral issues. After a few months, he is an entirely different child – happy, sociable, among the first to greet you when you enter the room. And to a little boy and his grandparents, you gave them something that money cannot buy – you gave them hope. This child care ministry exists as a beacon of hope because you have placed your hope in the One who is greater and will never fail us.

I often say to people that we are in the hope business. We have discovered the power that is present in our lives when we place our hope in the one who will never fail – and then we attach ourselves to God's plan so that this world will be brighter and filled with more light because we have been here. This is the season where we say there is always hope.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 1, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, we seek you everywhere with expectant eyes that invite us to see your hope in the world today. Amen.

Monday, December 2

Scripture: Psalm 130:1-8

I cry out to you from the depths, LORD—my Lord, listen to my voice! Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy! If you kept track of sins, LORD—my Lord, who would stand a chance? But forgiveness is with you—that’s why you are honored. I hope, LORD. My whole being hopes, and I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord—more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning! Israel, wait for the LORD! Because faithful love is with the LORD; because great redemption is with our God! He is the one who will redeem Israel from all its sin.

Observation: In Psalm 130, the psalmist said he was crying “out of the depths.” The CEB Study Bible said, “The term describes the destructive forces that diminish life and confront people with deadly threats.” Yet even in a time like that, he wrote, “I hope, Lord...I wait for God’s promise. My whole being waits for my Lord” (verses 5-6). This resilient, persistent hope is one of God’s promises for Christmas. It’s the reason we light the candle of hope on the first Sunday of Advent.

Application: Waiting is hard—we’re action-oriented people. But waiting connects to hope. It is being before God in expectation and patience (Psalm 40:1). It is knowing that God will act, and waiting for God to do so. When have you had to wait for God through the darkness, until light dawned? What helps you firm up your trust that God WILL act, in eternity if not now?

Prayer: O God, you know I don’t like to wait. I wish you would make everything right for me right now! This Advent season, remind me that waiting for you, in hope, is one key to the good life you have for me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 3

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5, 27-31

Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. Speak compassionately to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins! A voice is crying out: “Clear the LORD’s way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The LORD’s glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD’s mouth has commanded it.”

Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament”? Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn’t grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Observation: Isaiah 40 offered hope to Hebrews returning from exile in Babylon, speaking words of comfort and divine promise. Because God had never abandoned them, even in the days that felt the most painful and desolate, they could always keep hoping. God is in the business of “giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted.” That’s a promise we need as much today as the Israelites did.

Application: Today’s passage addressed the weary, doubtful complaint of the Israelites in exile: “My way is hidden from the Lord, my God ignores my predicament.” In what parts of your life do you struggle with a sense that God ignores your concerns and predicaments? On what did the prophet say you can focus to renew your hope and strength?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, on so many days it seems as though my steps falter, and I’m tempted to give up. I need your strength and hope—thank you for the promise that they are always there. Amen.

Wednesday, December 4

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7

Nonetheless, those who were in distress won’t be exhausted. At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. As on the day of Midian, you’ve shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire. A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David’s throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

Observation: “A child is born to us,” said Isaiah’s prophecy, “a son is given to us.” His words of hope rang through the years. “He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.” Maybe life’s darkness wasn’t permanent. In the hope of that amazing, unique birth, the promise that people walking in darkness would see “a great light” seemed worth hoping for.

Application: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.” It was, and is, an awesome promise. Yet even after meeting Jesus, Paul could write, “Now we see a dim reflection” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already lit up your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full glory of God’s light?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, just as the sun rises every morning, your light is always there to illumine my life. Help me keep my vision alert and focused for what your light seeks to show me. Amen.

Thursday, December 5

Scripture: Luke 2:25-32

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that

he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel."

Observation: Simeon was "led by the Spirit" to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit must have also led him to Mary, Joseph and their infant son rather than to any other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. Luke said, "The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ." So for Simeon, this was truly a dream come true.

Application: Simeon eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, even though the mighty Roman army firmly controlled Judea, and Israel's religious leaders often quarreled and were at times corrupt. How can you nurture a hopeful sense of "eager anticipation" about what God is doing today, and about Christ's return to fully establish his Kingdom?

Prayer: Lord God, I'm thankful for the story of how Simeon eagerly anticipated and welcomed Jesus. I pray that I might live my life in eager anticipation and openness to your Spirit for what you want to do today. Amen.

Friday, December 6

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD's glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.

Observation: This beautiful poem was probably first addressed to Israelites returning from exile in Babylon. The Jerusalem to which they returned had been sacked and burned. It was not, as they arrived, glorious. But God called the returned Israelites to be a light to others. God's hope wasn't just a show to watch passively. When the light shined on God's people, it called them to "Arise! Shine!"

Application: Verse 2 described a situation every generation seems to face (and ours certainly does, when random acts of violence spread fear and death): "Darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations." When have you faced a dark time? Were there people who shined God's light for you by loving you at those times? In what ways? Who are the hurting people God wants to love through you right now?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when the world seems the scariest and ugliest, shine your light in and through me. In place of gloom, give me a spirit that shines, not only at Christmas but all year round. Amen.

Saturday, December 7

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life

was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

Observation: Boldly and creatively, the prologue to John's gospel brought together the worlds of Greek and Hebrew thought. Greek thinkers saw the Word (in Greek, logos) as the force that directed the universe. Writers like Philo often personified the logos as the world's guiding force. In Hebrew thought, Genesis 1 said God created by speaking, and Proverbs 8:12, 22-31 said Wisdom was with God at creation. Yes, said John, coming to us out of the mysterious mists of eternity, the Word (Jesus) embodied all that power, wisdom and light.

Application: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (verse 5). God did not shun our darkened world, but came to live here—and in this world, Jesus' life created new life and light for all who trusted in him. Have there been times when it seemed that darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? What spiritual practices keep you growing closer to God, so that God's light keeps shining more and more brightly for you?

Prayer: God of life and light, I begin this Advent season in hope – the hope that beyond the tinsel and shopping, I will find the light and life that Jesus offers me. Thank you for coming as light into our darkened world. Amen.