

## The Power of Hope

This morning is the first Sunday of Advent, and as indicated by the first Advent candle, Advent is about hope. And, I don't know about you, but I think there is a great deficit of hope in our world today, especially in our culture and in our society. Whether it is the opium addiction and opium overdose epidemic, or the desperate acts of terrorist groups or lone deranged individuals, it all points to a loss of hope.

Although some people have criticized hope as an empty emotion, the Bible indicates that hope is right in the center of the top three gifts that God makes available to His people. Paul says, "Now these three things will remain: *"Faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."* Peter writes: *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."*

So Biblical hope, Advent hope, is neither empty nor impotent. This hope is not shapeless or passive; it is not "pie in the sky." It does not make us lazy. This hope is based on the sure and certain promises of God. This hope is based on a vision, not the pipe dream of someone on drugs or the hallucinations of a fool, but a clear and compelling picture of the future painted on the canvasses of our hearts by the Lord and presented to us by His holy prophets and apostles and written in God's book. This hope does not and will not disappoint us!

One of the great Advent passages in the Bible is found in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17. Genesis 17:1-4, 15-19 say: *"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a*

2

*son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."*

At the beginning of this story the hope of Abram and his wife Sarai had faltered. God had promised them a son many years before and had told them that in him, in this son, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. They waited a long time for this promise to be fulfilled but finally decided that Sarai at least was too old to have children. So when Abram was 86 years old, Sarai suggested that if they were ever to have children, it would require a surrogate mother. And since they didn't have any such thing as invitro fertilization back in those days, Sarai suggested that Abram would have to sleep with her servant girl Hagar. And since Abram couldn't see any other solution either, he agreed and Hagar gave birth to Issac.

Thirteen years later, God spoke to Abram and renewed the promise that Abram and Sarai would have a son of their own. By this time the whole idea was completely ridiculous. Abram was 99 and Sarai hadn't gotten any younger in the 13 years that had passed. Abram even laughed at God's suggestion as did Sarai when she found out about it. But God wasn't kidding. He made it perfectly clear that He meant to do what He promised: Abram and Sarai would have a son of their own in a year, no surrogates needed. And just to seal the deal, God changed Abram's name to "Abraham," meaning "the father of many," and God changed Sarai's name to "Sarah," meaning that she would be "the mother of kings." And, just to keep them and us aware of the fact that God's promises are no laughing matter, God told Abraham and Sarah to call their son "Isaac," which in the Hebrew means "he laughs."

From this rather funny story that is no laughing matter we learn several things. We learn that when God makes a promise, He will fulfill it. We learn that sometimes we may have to wait a long time to see God's promise fulfilled. We learn that doubting God's promise and impatiently taking matters into our

3

own hands is not a good idea (in fact, it is sin) and leads to all kinds of problems and complications, as illustrated by the eventual grief brought into the family through Hagar and her son Ishmael. We learn that God will always have the last laugh.

We also learn the meaning of biblical hope. In Romans 4, the Apostle Paul refers back to the Genesis 17 story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Paul says in verses 18-21: *"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."*

Now that's what we mean by biblical hope. Biblical hope is a hope stronger than any other hope because it is based on belief in the perfect integrity of God Almighty. God does not and cannot lie, and-except for lying-there is nothing impossible for Him to do. **So when God promises us something, we know He will bring it to pass.**

Another feature of biblical hope is that this hope emboldens us and empowers us to do things we would not otherwise attempt or succeed in doing. Once God made it clear to Abraham that it was through he and Sarah and no one else that a son would come, Abraham looked at Sarah and at himself in a different way. Suddenly, they were not laughing at God's promise any more; they were laughing because of it. Long forgotten passion and intimacy returned, and as they set out to do what God had promised they would do, God strengthened them. Romans 4:20 says that Abraham *"was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God."* I imagine Abraham and Sarah laughed at their accomplishment, found joy that they never imagined they could know again, wept with the privilege of being partners to a miracle. Yes it was a very long wait, but this was a promise worth waiting for. **God's promises are always worth waiting for.**

A third thing we learn about biblical hope is that biblical hope brings righteousness; it enables us to do what pleases God and to live in a right relationship with God. Paul says in Romans 4:22, through 5:2a: *"This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."* **When we do what we do because we believe what God has said, what we do will also be credited unto us as righteousness.**

A fourth and final thing we learn about biblical hope here is that when we stand on this hope and act on the basis of this hope, it will bring us joy; even in the midst of sufferings, it will bring us joy. Romans 5:2b-5 say, *"And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."*

I want you to know that I am talking about hope for two big reasons this morning. One reason I'm talking about hope is that this is the first Sunday of Advent and Advent begins with hope. The first candle on the Advent wreath is the candle of hope. Christmas begins as hope. Long ago, the prophet Isaiah promised, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* In Isaiah 9:6, further detail is given, *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulder. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* Given many years before it came to pass this promise brought hope, encouragement, and direction to the people of God. It gave them a reason to keep on living when everything for the moment was going wrong. It encouraged them to do what was right so that when Messiah came they would be found faithful. It united those

who believed and gave them a common identity when the circumstances of their lives would have otherwise divided them. This vision of the future made the present tolerable and filled it with meaning and purpose.

We can see evidence of these things even now, these many years later. As we wait for Christmas to arrive, we have something good to look forward to, we find more reason to be kind to one another and even to strangers, we sense a camaraderie not felt to this extent at any other time of the year. Such is the power of this hope. The future vision of the whole world under God's rule and filled with His peace, joy, and blessing--His Shalom--keeps us going.

The second reason I am talking about biblical hope this morning is because it is the antidote for the hope deficit we see in the world around us, and for the deficit of hope we may find within ourselves. Modern life is complicated and expensive and the pressures on us and our families can be very great. There are significant threats and struggles that we all face. There are family issues, financial issues, employment issues, and health issues. There are faith issues, as the secular world seems more and more secular and hostile toward the things we believe and toward the word that we live by.

But over and against all of this is the promise of our God and the hope it engenders. The apostle John says of Jesus coming into the world: *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it."*

Throughout this Advent season, let us be determined to draw near to God and to embrace the hope that has come into the world through the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Let us prepare Him room and invite the Lord to live within us. Let us obey His word in hope and reap the joy of seeing His miracles unfold before our eyes. Let us share the message of Christmas with others that they too may be transformed by the hope Jesus brings into the world. Let us live and work and witness in hope until Jesus comes again.

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Sermon for December 3, 2017

### The Power of Hope

**Genesis 17:1-4; 15-19,  
Romans 4:18-5:5**

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