

“Hope”
Psalm 39:6-7
December 23, 2001
Dr. Jerry Nelson

The angel said to the shepherds on that first Christmas:
Luke 2:10,11 “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

The psalmist wrote, Psalm 39:6-7 Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it. But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”

The subject today is Hope!

In Friday’s Denver Post there was story about a woman in New York who refuses to have a memorial service for her husband who was in the World Trade Center on September 11 but whose body has not been found.

It reports that she refuses to give up hope.

Cicero wrote, “While there’s life, there’s hope.”

Alexander Pope penned the words, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.”

Shakespeare noted, “The miserable have not other medicine but only hope.”

Samuel Johnson said, “It is necessary to hope...for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction.”

- We were made to hope.
- We were created to live in our own imagined future.
- We look forward to the beginning of good and the end of bad.
- To anticipate a better future is as natural as breathing.

In fact, if we finally concluded we had nothing to hope for, we would devolve into depression, despair and desperation.

I have read of one of the tortures of the human spirit inflicted by the Nazis in their prison camps was to make the prisoners dig deep holes, haul the dirt away only to return the next day and fill the hole.

This, done day after day, created a deep despair.

Theologian J.I. Packer has recently written, “While there’s life, there is hope” we often hear but the deeper truth is that “While there is hope there is life”. Take away hope, and life, with all its fascinating variety of opportunities and experiences reduces to mere existence – uninteresting, ungratifying, bleak, drab and repellent, a burden and a pain. People without hope often express their sense of reality and their feelings about themselves by saying they wish they were dead, and sometimes they make attempts on their own life.” (Packer in *Never Beyond Hope* 10)

Immanuel Kant said that one of life’s three basic questions is, What may we hope for?

What is hope?

The way some people use the word “hope would best be defined as **pessimistic wishful thinking**.

- This is the “I don’t think it will happen, but one can always hope.”
- This is the “All we have left is hope.”
- Or when death approaches, “One can only hope there is a God and a heaven.

The way others use the word “hope” it might be defined as **optimistic wishful thinking**.

- “Here’s hoping”, “Oh, I hope so!”
- “I bought 100 lottery tickets today, I sure hope I win!”

Another way “hope” is used is as **determined wishful thinking**.

- This is where the future isn’t guaranteed but we will do our best to make it happen and trust in fate or even God to complete it.

- “I hope to graduate, I hope to get married, I hope to have a job by the New Year.”
- This is hoping for the best with no guarantee it will come to be.

There is yet a fourth kind of hope, which I will introduce later.

Christmas is a season of hope.

For a few days each year a sizeable portion of the world’s population imagines and even participates in a different kind of world.

For just hours we hope for something different from what we usually experience – we hope for a world of courtesy and kindness, of tolerance, generosity and even love.

What kind of hope is **that**?

For some I suspect it is a pessimistic wishful thinking – they don’t really expect anything to actually change.

They just play-act with the rest of the culture.

For others there may actually be an optimistic wishful thinking or even a determined wishful thinking – truly wanting and even expecting things can and will be different.

At the Christmas season there is a spirit of festivity, a neighborliness, a tolerance, and a giving spirit in greater degree than other times of the year.

We enjoy the positive attitudes and the unusual friendliness of neighbors and even strangers.

Feel-good movies and a nostalgic expectation of the same feelings we had as children buoy our spirits.

But for all the good there is in this “Christmas spirit”, and it is good, there is a nagging sense, the older we get, that it is a façade, a pretending something is real when we know it is not.

Just beneath the surface is a sadness that what could be, isn’t.

And a nagging reminder that all the tinsel and glitter in our homes and on our streets can’t cover the pain of the world as it really is.

And for all our enjoyment of the modern comforts of life, we know that the most important aspects of being human - relationships – haven't changed in 6 thousand years of recorded history.

Brothers still murder, friends and lovers still betray, and death still silences.

When I stop and think about some aspects of the world and life it can get more than a little disheartening.

Much of the rest of the world doesn't look like our well-manicured suburban landscape with our three, four, or five bedroom houses with gas fireplaces and recreation rooms.

And even when we look closely at many of those middle and upper-middle class homes we don't find the inside to be quite as put together as the outside – in too many relationships are tearing or torn with deep pain.

We seem to be able to maintain our "hope" for a better future as long as we keep our expectations fuzzy enough or keep them low enough.

We live as if we are at the apex of time and the center of the universe.

We deny history, or are ignorant of it, and refuse to think beyond a retirement plan.

As long as we can keep our eyes and thoughts focused only on the present and the immediate future we can pretend all is well and that we can control our destiny, so we hope! –

We'll get an education, we'll get married, we'll get a good job, we'll have kids, we'll enjoy life, we'll eventually settle into an early retirement with the health, money and time to do as we please.

But life often interrupts those plans.

We get sick, friends and loved ones are unfaithful, the economy goes south and we lose our job, our retirement funds recede with the recession, and our kids don't quite do what we expected.

Then we finally think of the past and realize how many before us assumed they were at the center of time and the universe.

Millions born, lived and died with no memory of them left.

Millions of people, who struggled, loved, cared, worked, played, enjoyed and died.

If 6000 years of human history was compressed to a 24-hour day then a single life lasts just minutes

Or as the writers of Scripture put it, we are but a vapor, a breath, fragile grass – here today and gone tomorrow.

And if we are willing, we realize that within 200 years, not one of us in this room will even be remembered.

Oh, maybe we will be a name on someone's genealogical chart, but we will be gone, of no consequence to another human being, as we never existed.

We attend the funeral of a colleague and we hear five minutes of eulogy followed by sixty seconds of silence and we say to ourselves does that summarize a life?

Thirty, sixty, or eighty years of toil and love, of thought and life reduced to 6 minutes and then forgotten on our way back to work?

No! Our hope is larger than that.

Except in despair, we don't want to just cease to be.

We want to believe our lives matter.

- Why are utopias dreamed?
- Why are new philosophies developed?
- Why do new political parties or new religions appear?

Because human beings long for it to be different than it is.

Because too many people realize it has to change – it is intolerable the way it is.

There is too much death, disease, and poverty.

There is too much pain and injustice.

The prophets, ancient and modern, speak of a new day, a new beginning, a new world.

When confronted with human suffering, we want it to be different.

Can it be?

Dare we even hope it will be different, and if we do, is that just so much wishful thinking?

Misplaced hopes are tragic.

Little pains us more than seeing hope misplaced, or hope unmet.

The faithful dog refusing to leave the side of his dead master.

The little boy standing on his porch with suitcase packed waiting for hours for a daddy who never comes.

A reading of history reminds us that the kinds of hope I have described thus far are just as tragic because they are so misplaced.

- Do we still live in an optimistic bubble thinking that science will eradicate disease,
- that the Democrats or the Republicans will eliminate poverty,
- that the United Nations or our bombs will stop war,
- that one more treaty will finally get the Arabs and Israelis to live in peace or
- that psychotherapy will end divorce and depression?

Do we still live with the illusion that a world leader can set things right.

After Alexander the Great, the Caesars, Charlemagne, Napoleon, Marx, Stalin, Mao, Kennedy and Reagan, do we still think a man can lead us to the Promised Land?

Hey Preacher, why so negative, this is Christmas, a time to focus on peace and love and all the virtues of life.

This is a time to be optimistic, hopeful, cheerful, expectant.

We need a little encouragement especially after 9-11 and in the midst of a recession.

But I ask you, does “The Grinch who Stole Christmas” and “Miracle on 34th Street” do it for you?

- Into this despair-inducing “nothing ever changes” world,

- into the seemingly endless cycle of birth, life and death,
- and into a world of hopes dreamed in youth, dampened in life and dashed in death, came a baby.

The Angel said in Luke 2:10,11 “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

I promised another definition of hope.

It is **Confidence in Jesus – an Expectation of God.**

All real hope is built on God’s intervention in the world.

A real baby in real time - God came.

I’m tired of Christmas celebrated as nothing more than a temporary emotional facelift or a placebo of false hope.

I tire of the world pretending hope when its hope is so misplaced.

So much more is available - not just wishful thinking but hope grounded in reality.

Hope only makes sense if something has truly changed, if God has actually invaded our world.

- Jesus is.
- Jesus came.
- Jesus died for us and rose again.
- Jesus is coming again.

History has amply demonstrated that hope placed anywhere else is woefully insufficient, even tragic.

- The basic, fundamental problem of humans is not the shortness of life,
- nor the inevitability of death,
- nor even that loved ones should part,
- but that we are alienated, separated from God.

Once fellowship with God is restored by his grace through faith in Jesus, then hope lives.

Biblical hope arises from a relationship with God through Jesus.

Yes, God designed us to hope but only in genuine hope not in its hollow pretenders.

Biblical hope is not naïve thinking or even calculated wishful thinking; it is a full faith in God through Christ.

This is not hope in hope, like faith in faith, but hope in Jesus.

Jesus is both the source and object of our hope.

He is the source in that there would be no hope without his intervention.

And he is the object in that he, himself, is our hope.

I do not hope for health, long life, faithful friends, or adequate finances.

I wish for those things but they are not my hope.

Hope is not a conjured confidence.

It is not wishful thinking.

Hope is confidence in and expectation of Jesus.

You can have your other kinds of cheery optimism.

You can have your naïve “well at least we have hope!”

Give me Jesus!

Let me pin my future on him and hook my wagon to his star.

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 39:6-7 “Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it. But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.”

I don't know what that may entail along the way.

I don't know if it means health or sickness, if it means financial adequacy or poverty, if it means faithfulness of friends or betrayal.

But I'll take the bad with the good because I know he is there, he is all-powerful and he loves me. He is my hope.

Lloyd Ogilvie, Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, wrote, “Hope is a gift of God through Christ that produces a confident, unshakable trust in his faithfulness, and a vibrant expectation of his timely interventions in

keeping with his gracious promises to us. Authentic hope is always a by-product of a personal relationship with God. It comes from knowing God.” (Ogilvie A Future and a Hope 50)

Listen to the way the Apostle Peter expresses real hope in 1 Peter 1:3-9 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Immanuel Kant asked, “What may we hope for?”
Is your hope “wishful thinking” or is your hope in Jesus?

Allow him to be your hope today!

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people – Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.”