

- "Our Living Hope" 1 Peter 1:3

How long can you wait before you give up hope?

This might have been the question families were asking when the mudslides destroyed our highways recently, sweeping cars and passengers off the road down into ravines. Rescue teams worked frantically to save anyone they could, but until families saw their son, daughter, husband, or wife they could only hold on to hope. How long could they hold on?

Many people are feeling this way about COVID. For two years now we have lived with the threat of a virus that has caused terrible suffering to many families. We have adjusted the way we travel, dine out and even shop because of this virus. People are tired of the constant adjustments and readjustments that must be made. We hold onto a hope that some day we will live without that threat hanging over us. How long can we wait without giving up hope?

Advent is the season before Christmas that helps introduce us to some of the great themes of scripture, themes that are rooted in our faith and carry us through the challenges of this life. This first Sunday of Advent we focus on hope, for Jesus was the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. God made some amazing promises through the prophets of old about the Messiah who would come and set things right. He would free God's people from oppression and bring God's blessings to His people.

Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Micah, Zechariah and Malachi all shared promises of the Messiah who would come. The excitement started to build. The people anticipated that God would do something soon. God had spoken through his prophets.

And then everything went silent. For 400 years there was not a word from God. How long could the hope of the people last? How long could they hold on to the promise of a better tomorrow when nothing seemed to change? How long would the oppressors win and God's people seemingly lose? How long before hope was gone?

Each Advent season we remember the many years of waiting, hoping for a better tomorrow. We think about how challenging those 400 years must have been, waiting for God to speak once again. Could it be that God had forgotten them? They hoped not!

And then suddenly an angel appears to an old priest named Zechariah, and says that in his old age, and in the old age of his wife, they were going to have a son. And this son would bring many people back to God, restoring their hope.

Soon afterwards the angel appears to a teenage girl and announces that she is about to bear the Son of God. The angel then goes to her fiancé and tells him that his betrothed is pregnant but marry her anyway. The child she carries comes from God. In fact he is Emmanuel – God with us.

What a way to break 400 years of silence!

We learn so much from the Christmas story, but one of the great lessons we must never forget is to hold onto our hope. God ALWAYS comes through on his promises. The only thing is, God is never in a rush, and His answers may take longer to come than we wished they would. But never give up hope...

Advent not only looks backwards to how the hopes of Israel were fulfilled in Jesus, it also looks forward, for God has promised that Jesus would come again. Jesus came to be our Saviour and gave his life to rescue us from the oppression of sin and death. When salvation's work was complete he returned to be with the Father in heaven. But he will come again to earth and take his followers to be with him in heaven.

Jesus said,

I go to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2,3)

Jesus said there would be signs that would alert those who were watching that the time of his return was getting near. He spoke of wars and rumours of war, of floods and famines, of earthquakes and pestilence. He foretold days when people would be filled with fear, and many false prophets would rise up to deceive the people. It is hard not to see these signs of Jesus' coming all around us, so our hope for his return grows.

It is easy to see that hope continues to be one of the great themes of Advent – the hope of those who waited for Jesus' first coming, and the hope of the church today waiting for his second coming.

Yet hope is woven into the very fabric of our lives, and we must hold onto hope each and every day for so many things, from the mundane, like I hope I get a good parking spot at the mall, to the big things, like I hope I can beat this cancer.

Victor Frankl, psychiatrist and neurologist argued that "loss of hope can have a deadly effect on man." He speaks from experience, as he was a holocaust survivor who watched many men die when they lost hope. As long as they had hope – hope of release, hope of help coming, hope that the war would someday end – they could live. But when they lost hope, when there was no light on the horizon of their worlds, they would curl up in the corner and die.

"Hope is necessary for our well-being," writes Pastor Derek Geldart. He goes on, "Hope gives significance to life choices and enables people to endure living in a fallen world where pain, suffering and injustice are the norm. When tribulations come like a thief in the night and rob a person of their livelihood, material possessions or physical health; the enormity of this kind of suffering can crush even the steadiest of souls!" (from his sermon on 1 Peter 1)

God knows how much we need hope, so again and again he gives us words of hope in the scripture, words we can hold onto in the darkest of hours.

This week I read the familiar words of Lamentations 3:22,23, “His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Thy faithfulness.” Then our speaker on a Zoom meeting this week used this text for his devotional. After that I came into the living room and Lise was memorizing this passage, reciting it out loud. Let me read the verses around it so you get the context:

¹⁹ I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.

²⁰ I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.

²¹ Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:

²² Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

²³ They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴ I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him.”

²⁵ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,
to the one who seeks him;

²⁶ it is good to wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

This is another passage about hope.

The Apostle Paul writes,

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Romans 15:13)

This leads us to our text for today. You cannot separate hope from God. The kind of hope we need to face the challenges of life, the kind of hope that survives cancer, COVID and even death is a hope that is rooted and secured in God. Hebrews 6:19 says we have a hope which is an anchor for our souls, so no matter how big the storms of life may be we need not drift or be crashed against the rocky shore line. We have an anchor that holds us fast – our hope.

So what is the hope? Hear again our text for today:

3 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,

The phrase that nearly jumped off the page at me was that simple phrase: living hope.

What can we say about that living hope?

1. It comes from God.

God is on our side, and working all things for our good. The God of **Genesis 1:1**, “In the beginning God...” the God of **John 3:16**, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life,” the God of **Isaiah 41:10**, “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

2. It flows from God’s mercy.

We deserved judgement and death, but God showed us mercy. We should be dead already, but we are not. So that means God has a plan and we are a part of it. There is purpose for our lives. It will be revealed in God’s good time. As **Jeremiah 29:11 says**, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

3. It is connected to Jesus’ resurrection.

Even as Jesus conquered death, we too will find victory. But we must come to Jesus to find that victory. It is Jesus who gives the new birth, the fresh start, the hope of a chance to try again. It is Jesus who gives hope of resurrection life. It is Jesus who “shields us by God’s power” (v. 5).

In fact, it is Jesus who is our living hope. All God’s promises and mercies are found in Jesus, so when we need help- and hope – we go to Jesus. He is the living One who walks with us through whatever we are facing today, so that we might be standing when we get to the other side. It is Jesus who whispers again to us in our battles, “Fear not. I am with thee. Be not dismayed.”

Jesus is our living hope.

Two weeks ago I had a friend come to my office, a man I met through working at the funeral home when I first arrived in Nanaimo. When he arrived I was taken back. He had lost so much weight and he had aged ten years since I last saw him a few months back. He explained that for three months he has had a sensation of pins and needles which not only caused him to scratch his skin raw, but it kept him up through the night. This incredibly optimistic, joyful man had been reduced to a sad old man who wasn’t sure he wanted to keep living.

He needed some hope.

So he came to my office that day to ask me to pray for him. He needed a touch from our living hope, a touch from Jesus. So there in my office we prayed that God would have mercy on him and touch his body and make him whole. My friend left with tears in his eyes and a simple, “Thank you.” There was a spark of hope because we had come to our living hope.

This week my friend was back in my office. The twinkle in his eyes had started to return. Before he said a word I knew God had heard our prayer, and had taken away the pins and needles.

Sure enough, that is what he came to tell me. He was feeling much better, the tingling was almost gone and he was sleeping again.

Our Living hope does not disappoint!

This morning I simply encourage you to look to Jesus for your hope. It does not matter what you are facing – health issues, frustrations with the medical system, financial troubles, job challenges, family troubles, school problems, grief, confusion, betrayal, pain... bring these to Jesus. He is our living hope!

Maybe this morning you need a few minutes to come to the altar and pray, seeking our living hope for his help. You need hope today, and you know you can find hope in Jesus. The altar is open even as we sing the next song. Don't leave this service until you have found the hope you need for today.