

The Heart of Christmas – Part 1

Sunday, November 27, 2022

Hope Is At The Heart Of Christmas

Key Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7, Matthew 1:22-23, Romans 15:4

Believe it or not, The Christmas season is already upon us. With increasing measure we can see and hear evidence of it all around. Today I want to begin a new sermon series that will introduce us to four of the main themes at the very heart of Christmas. During this advent (which simply means the coming of Christ), we will look at how hope, peace, joy and love are at the heart of Christmas. Today we will discover the hope that comes to us through the birth of Jesus Christ. I am sure we could all use a little hope.

We can learn a lot about having hope by watching the way children embrace the holiday season. Nothing says “hope” like the Christmas lists children write down during this season. Did you ever have a Christmas hope list? I know as children we did. We would anxiously await the arrival of the Sears Catalog and then spend days searching through the toy sections to look at gifts and to imagine what it would be like having them. We would even cut out the pictures and pretend we had the toys to play with. My youngest daughter loves to make Christmas lists. For years she has, sometimes months in advance, written up very detailed lists. Sometimes on her own or sometimes with the help of Miss Dana here at the church as they would look online and then write down specific items she wanted for Christmas. Why, because from the moment she wrote it down, she had hope that it would come to pass.

My wife asks each of our children to give her a list for Christmas. Why? Because she wants to know what they are hopping for and be a part of fulfilling those hopes. But the true reason there is hope at the heart of Christmas is not because of gifts but because of the birth of Jesus Christ. His arrival on the earth was the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken hundreds of years ago. That prophecy is actually one of the most well-known scripture passages shared during this time of year.

Turn in your Bibles to Isaiah Chapter 9

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. **3** You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. **4** For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. **5** Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined

for burning, will be fuel for the fire. 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

This powerful scripture is one we are quite familiar with at Christmas time. Especially verse 2 and Verses 6 & 7. Verses 3-5 you might not be as familiar with; but are an important part of the promise of Hope that is revealed to us in this prophecy.

Through The Holy Spirit Isaiah writes one of the most recognizable of all Old Testament prophecies about the coming birth of Christ.

The world was feeling the full weight of sin, and it had wreaked havoc on all of creation. What Isaiah offered in chapter nine was something the Jewish people needed more than anything—hope. Hope that one day someone would come to make all things right and restore what had been broken.

The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of that hope and it offers us hope in our lives today. Jesus' birth was something promised that actually came to pass and because we can trust that He is still working today - we have hope. No matter what we are facing in life right now, through Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection God has given us Hope!

Yet to truly understand the Hope that Isaiah's promise offers we must first understand the conditions under which that promise was given.

The backdrop to Isaiah's writings (around 740 BC) was darkness and gloom. The people of Israel had been suffering through the reigns of ungodly kings who had led the people far from God. It was a very dark time in history. Isaiah wrote these words knowing God would have to intervene to bring Israel back to himself. The kingdom was crumbling, and the people needed hope.

POINT #1 – THE PRESENCE OF DARKNESS THREATENS OUR HOPE

The passage he writes is born of gloom and darkness and reminds us that the presence of darkness threatens our Hope. In fact, if you back up a couple of verses to the last verse of chapter 9 you read.....

Isaiah 8:22

22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

This passage makes two major statements. This first is an acknowledgement of the brokenness and darkness that surrounded Israel due to sin and corruption. The second is the hope of a dawning light through the birth of a child who would one day make all things right. The Jewish people in the Old Testament needed these words to remind them that God had not forgotten about them.

The promise states...

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

One of the reasons Christmas resonates in our hearts is because we, too, live in a world that is similar to Israel. Our world is dark and corrupt because of the sin that so easily entangles. There is war, disease, conflict, and oppression all around us. We, too, are in need of the Christ child to usher in a light to push back the darkness around us.

The center of the Christmas story is focused squarely on the birth of Jesus. He is the fulfillment of the Israelite's hope that God would push back the darkness and shine a bright light into the world. Christmas is a reminder that whatever it is we hope for in our lives—healing, restoration, forgiveness, or a fresh start—it is available to us through Immanuel, who is God with us. Hope is not a result of the absence of conflict, difficulty, struggle, or trial. Hope is a result of the presence of God.

POINT #2 – THE LIGHT OF GOD’S PRESENCE HAS COME TO GIVE US HOPE

The book of Matthew also reminds us of Isaiah’s writings. The gospel writer was making the connection between what Isaiah had prophetically written and what had taken place in a manger in Bethlehem.

Matthew 1:22-23

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

A young Jewish man named Joseph was presented with a very difficult decision to make. He was engaged to be married to a woman named Mary, but she was already pregnant. Joseph planned to call the wedding off because it appeared his bride-to-be had been

unfaithful. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to go forward with the marriage because the child in her womb was from the Holy Spirit. All of these events took place to fulfill the prophecy from the Old Testament, which claimed there would be a child born as a light in the darkness and a hope for all people. The child would be named Immanuel, which means God with us.

Illustration: *A common plant that grows in the southwest desert of the United States is the Agave Americana. Also known as a century plant, it thrives in rocky, dry, and mountainous desert locations and grows splayed leaves that grow to be a foot wide. This plant can reach twelve feet in diameter and grow to be six feet tall. Perhaps its most unusual trait is its long reproduction cycle. For 20 to 30 years, this plant remains the same height and puts out no flowers. But suddenly and without warning, a new bud will sprout. Resembling a tree-trunk-sized asparagus spear, it will rise into the sky at a rate of seven inches per day until it reaches a height of 20 to 40 feet. Then it culminates with a crown of several clumps of yellow blossoms that last for three weeks. Similar to the century plant, some of the greatest answers to our hoping and longing take time and patience in order to see the beauty unfold.*

Through Isaiah, God revealed that one day in the future, He would bring a great light and salvation through the birth of a child. It was not until hundreds of years later that Matthew recorded Jesus's birth in Bethlehem. Jesus is the very presence of God on earth. He offers forgiveness of sin, destruction of evil, and the promise of eternal life. God even painted a picture of the hope

You have enlarged the nation (Prosperity) and increased their joy (happiness); they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, (Provision) as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder (Victory). 4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, (removal of bondage and burdens) the rod of their oppressor. (relief from oppression) 5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. (a destruction of the past)

So why do we read Isaiah's prophecy each year during Christmas? It is because seeing the faithfulness of God in the past gives us deep and abiding hope in the present and unwavering trust for the future. The apostle Paul made an appeal for hope to those who trust in Christ as he wrote a letter to the early church in Rome.

Romans 15:4

4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Paul said everything that had been written in the past— all of the prophecy and fulfillment—is meant to teach us how to hold onto faith in God to answer our prayers. What has been written gives us endurance and encouragement that we might have hope. It is important that we revisit the prophetic words of the Old Testament and the fulfillment that comes through the birth of Jesus because it reminds us that God can be trusted to come through and meet us in our greatest time of need.

POINT #3 – HOPE IS OURS TODAY

How do you need hope today? Our hope is not just the promise of the prophecy of long ago or even the fulfillment of that Prophecy with the events surrounding the birth of Christ. It is in knowing that right now there is hope in Jesus Christ.

I love the words Thomas Chisolm wrote in the Hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness"

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!*

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Illustration: *Dr. James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior through a slow-developing cancer. Several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. She felt terribly alone—so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope? Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, ma'am. He's six weeks old and completely housebroken." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.*

"Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked. The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained here in this envelope, ma'am. The

dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book: How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever.

In desperation she again asked, "Who sent me this puppy?" As the young man turned to leave he said, "Your husband, ma'am. Merry Christmas." She opened the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him in heaven. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then remembered the puppy at her feet. She picked up the golden furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation [of hope] washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness.

"Little fella," she said to the dog. "It's just you and me, but you know what? There's a box down in the basement I bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

Our God is always right on time. He knows exactly what we need, and he can be trusted to reveal the light of Christ in order to push back the darkness in our lives. In a land full of deep darkness, a light has indeed dawned.

I want to invite you to express your hope in God this morning by bringing Him the things that way heavy on your heart.

Prayer

Father God, we come to you this morning in need of hope—hope that you are faithful and have provided all we need by sending your Son to us. We ask that the light of his life would shine into our lives and lift our heads. We offer to you the areas of our lives where we need your presence. We trust you today with our very lives, and we look forward to seeing how you will come through. Thank you for the hope that can only come from you. Thank you for showing us the heart of Christmas. Amen.