

THE HOPE OF CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Hallelujah Chorus by Georg Frederich Handel is quite possibly one of the most recognizable and majestic musical pieces for all time. In 1741 Dublin's Lord Lieutenant commissioned Handel to write a new oratorio based on a biblical libretto assembled by art patron Charles Jennens. As a result, Handel's most famous oratorio, *Messiah*, made its debut at the New Music Hall in Dublin in April 1742. Handel composed *Messiah* in an astounding interlude, somewhere between three and four weeks in August and September 1741. "He would literally write from morning to night," says Sarah Bardwell of the Handel House Museum in London.

The text/libretto of Handel's *Messiah*, written by Charles Jennens comes directly from the Bible with his primary source the King James Version of the Bible. For all but one of the Psalm texts, however, he used the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Altogether, the libretto is taken from 81 Bible verses that come from 14 different books of the Bible. Of these books, Isaiah is quoted the most frequently (21 verses) followed by the Book of Psalms (15 verses) and 1 Corinthians (10 verses). It is interesting and significant to note that all of the passages from 1 Corinthians come from 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter that scholars like to call the "Resurrection Chapter."

Our Scripture text for this morning, also from the Prophet Isaiah, falls into two distinct parts. Both deal with Israel's future hope for the coming of God's kingdom. The first part reflects the hope for a righteous ruler in the line of David. The second expresses the hope for an age of harmony and peace. The context for this prophecy is the difficult period of tensions surrounding a time of war when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaeans of Damascus tried to force Judah and King Ahaz to join the rebellion against Assyria. This was a time of great distress in ancient Israel, one that is characterized by a deep longing for a righteous ruler from the Davidic line. This is expressed in Isaiah's prophecy of the peaceable kingdom to come in verses 6-9. The promise that the king of peace will embody and make possible one in which the whole of creation will participate – hence we see the prospect for the dawning of a new day when "the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." In our reading this morning, the prophet Isaiah is addressing the current situation in ancient Israel – how then has this prophecy become part of our Advent liturgy as a foretelling of the coming of The Messiah, the son of God?

I think the best way to understand how this prophecy so specified for the unsettled world in the years 735-732 B.C.E. is so pivotal is to borrow a line from the Advent Study by Lee Strobel – and this is that Jesus did not suddenly "show up" when he came from heaven in human form to live among us, teach us and ultimately die for us. Jesus has always been there from the very beginning of creation. Listen to the words in the beginning of John's gospel – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." (NIV) Jumping down to verse 14 – "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

While in its Old Testament setting, the shoot from the stump was expected to be a Davidic king to follow quickly on the heels of Judah's disastrous King Ahaz (who had become a vassal of the Assyrian ruler), the New Testament view is that the text applies more to a much later descendant of Jesse in the person of Jesus Christ. Why is this important for us to know this morning? Well, on one level, it isn't, except to put a frame around this prophecy of hope from the Prophet Isaiah. It is also important in that there may be a way forward by looking at Isaiah's original audience. The reason they were willing to listen to Isaiah was because of their circumstances and worries.

Isaiah's message here is basically this: *Isaiah's words about the next king were to say, "Here's our immediate hope," and his words about the peaceable future were to say, "Here's our ultimate hope."*

Our world today is not all that different than Isaiah's original audience, think about it...

- Assyria is long gone, but terrorists abound.
- The United States is not under a king, but its political system, with its vicious partisanship, can, at best, be described as gridlocked.
- Few people these days see government as a very effective apparatus for the common good.
- Each day, there's more bad news. Millions of people don't even follow the news anymore, and many who do refuse to check the news before going to bed so their sleep is not disturbed.

Our hopes are raised periodically by the promises from new and rising political stars. But then our hopes are crushed by the reality that follows elections. Like the ancient people of Judah, we can benefit from being reminded *of the ultimate hope*.

The word that kept jumping out at me as I was studying this past week is the word "hope!" Taking my sermon title and presenting it in the form of a question, I ask you this morning, "What is your Hope of Christmas?" Keep in mind, that when the Bible speaks of hope, it is not talking about the stuff we wish will happen someday. In fact, the Bible is quite clear that some hope is *not* solid ground, but in fact is sinking sand. Hope based on the accumulation of goods or wealth, position or anything else *that is not God* is false hope, built on sinking sand. Real hope is not some sort of wishful thinking that those with strong enough gumption muster up from some inner core. No, it is rather an ultimate belief that when all else fails, when every other support gives way, our lives remain in God's hands. You need to be reminded, I especially need to be reminded when I become overwhelmed with the only news being bad news – God still sits on the throne and Jesus at God's right side. God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has got this.

The Hope of Christmas. What does this look like for you? I can remember as a teenager hoping that Papa would be 100% successful with his personal gifts for mom. As the oldest child at home at the time, it became my job to wrap Papa's presents to Mom. Most years, Pop fell short of the mark. Mom and Pop had a great love for one another, but they did not understand each other very well, if at all. They really were like two ships passing in the night. Mom was not at all bashful to tell Papa exactly what she thought of his presents to her. So, each year I would hope.

The Rev. David Lose, past president of Luther Seminary has some interesting thoughts on Christmas Hope – “If you were to spend a moment daydreaming about your idea for a perfect Christmas, what images would you conjure? Pews filled to bursting with the faithful? Gorgeous music and candlelight? A deserved and blessed rest with family and friends after the Christmas Eve services? A family gathering unattended by quarrels and permeated instead by a sense of Christmas good cheer? Healing for a loved one who is ill? Time with someone you miss?” But is this the hope of Christmas embodied in our reading from Isaiah? When I read Rev. Lose’s words, I see these as Christmas preparations – as he said, for the perfect Christmas.

Advent was originally devised as a season during which to prepare for the arrival of the Christ child in earnest repentance and humility - well those days are mostly over. Today, Advent is a time of preparing a Christmas celebration that is about Christ’s birth, of course, but also is dominated by feasts, presents, family gatherings, and all the rest. In other words – Christmas preparations during Advent have a way of taking on a life of their own. Our already busy lives become even busier – and the world around us is in full agreement. There was a time, not so very long ago, when Black Friday was simply one 24-hour period to get the best prices for Christmas shopping. Did you notice that this year, Black Friday savings began before Thanksgiving and continued on the week after?

Rev. Lose has an interesting suggestion for how you and I can handle all this craziness. What if, instead of cutting back on our traditional preparations and celebration, we would have *more* – more peace, more joy, more grace, more ... Christmas? What if, we decided to dream bigger dreams and hope grander hopes? Early in my full-time ministry, 20 years ago, I was somewhat chastised for being naïve – for having too many expectations of people. Well, in many ways, I believe we expect too little. And when we expect little, little is what we will get.

Along with seeking more, I invite you, right where you are, to make a quick “to do” list for Advent. Instead of making out your weekly grocery list while the preacher drones on and on, this is your chance to jot down the various tasks you need and want to get done. Maybe it’s shopping for gifts or attending the kids’ school Christmas concert or getting ready for the holiday feast or noting the times of the Christmas Eve services or making end-of-the-year charitable contributions. Take a few moments now, be fairly exhaustive about what you want to get done over the next two and a half weeks.

Got that? Now, daydream about what you hope Christmas will be like. What kind of day do you want to have? More than that, what kind of relationships do you want to be a part of? Even more, what kind of world do you want to live in this Christmas and beyond? Our hopes, after all, surely aren’t limited to our immediate wants and needs but reach out to include our larger families, communities, and world. Perhaps you may want to write a brief sentence on a piece of paper that captures your hope for your life and the world this Christmas, or perhaps it’s enough just to think about it.

With regard to the kind of world in which we want to live, our reading from Isaiah may be helpful. This morning we are given a picture of life where the wolf and the lamb rest together and all are equal and live at peace with each other. It might be helpful, as you ponder or write or think, to return to this scripture in the coming week to capture God’s hopes and promises.

Now, take a good look at your picture of “Christmas hope” in your mind, and “work backwards” by reviewing the “to-do” list you made, circling those tasks that contribute directly to your own deep hopes and longings about your lives and world. There may be some things on the list that are important in the short run but don’t contribute to your larger vision and hope. And perhaps Advent can be a time to put things in perspective, to channel our energy and resources to those things that matter most ... to us, to our families and communities, and to God.

In closing, a story of how I hope you and I will capture the true spirit of Christmas and live into true Christmas Hope.

Paul received an automobile from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it.

“Is this your car, mister?” he asked.

Paul nodded. “My brother gave it to me for Christmas.” The boy was astounded. “You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn’t cost you nothing? Boy, I wish ...” He hesitated. Of course, Paul knew what he was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the lad said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels.

“I wish,” the boy went on, “that I could be a brother like that.”

Paul looked at the boy in astonishment, then impulsively he added, “Would you like to take a ride in my automobile?”

“Oh yes, I’d love that.”

After a short ride, the boy turned and with his eyes aglow, said, “Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?” Paul smiled a little. He thought he knew what the lad wanted. He wanted to show his neighbors that he could ride home in a big automobile. But, again, Paul was wrong. “Will you stop where those two steps are?” the boy asked. He ran up the steps. Then in a little while Paul heard him coming back, but he was not coming fast. He was carrying his little crippled brother. He sat him down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against him and pointed to the car. “There she is, Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Christmas and it didn’t cost him a cent. And some day I’m gonna give you one just like it ... then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I’ve been trying to tell you about.”

Paul got out and lifted the lad to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable holiday ride.

My Hope for Christmas is that all human beings would become like the older brother. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.