

Advent 2 - Looking Through the Lense of Hope

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] I'd like to carry out a couple of thought experiments this morning. Here's the first one. I'm going to ask you to imagine, to remember, a time in your life that you would perhaps regard as the happiest.

I'm not going to ask you to share this with the person next to you or anywhere near you. I'm just going to ask you to think about it. So I want you to think about a moment in your life, it might have been a period of your life, say childhood, for example, or it might have been a particular day or a week, maybe a holiday, a special event, a special occasion, but something that you look back on that you regard as perhaps the happiest time in your life so far.

I'll just give you a few moments to think about that. Okay, so think about something that was really special. And having thought about that thing, just ask yourself the question, what is it particularly about that memory or set of memories that gives you that really warm glow inside?

And just hold on to that for a few moments. Now you've got that, here's a question.

If you're really honest with yourself, what at that point in your life would have been not good?

[1 : 44] In other words, at some point, no matter how wonderful life was at that moment, I'm pretty sure that there would have been something going on in your life as well that was not so great.

And the reason for I to say that, I think quite confidently, is that life is never perfect. There's always that combination of what you might call the blessings and the battles, or the battles and the blessings.

And sometimes one becomes more prominent than the other. That's true of life completely. It's never perfect this side of eternity.

And so as you think of that moment, that day, or that period of your life that you think of, that's what brings you that warm glow, what kind of troubles or concerns were going on at that time?

For me, I'm thinking of two things. One thing I'm thinking of, time when I was a student. I loved being a student. It just was a time of, I think of straight away, I think it was a time of freedom and just learning so much as well.

[3 : 01] It was just such a great time for me, and I absolutely loved it. But I'm also aware that if I'm really honest with myself, that actually I very quickly forget about things like exams and all the crisis that goes with trying to meet essay deadlines and all the other stuff.

The other sort of really pleasant thought that brings me a warm glow inside is when our children were really young, were really tiny. And then I kind of remember that actually there was a time when we had three of them under the age of four.

And actually, do I need to even complete that sentence? The point is, is we look back on our lives at those times that we think, oh, that was just such an amazing time, wasn't it?

And we look through those rose-tinted spectacles, don't we? Where we only see the positives, but not the negatives. So why is it then that when we look to the future, that instinct seems to be reversed?

That we look to the future and our human instincts latch on to the things that we fear. The things that we get anxious and worried about and the things that could go wrong, probably won't most of the time, but we fear they might.

[4 : 21] And we find it difficult, if not impossible, to latch on to all that is positive. Christian hope is focused on an ultimate future where Christ will return and all will be made new.

There will be no more suffering, no more death or dying or pain, no more tears, every last one of them will be wiped away. Ultimately, all of Scripture and all of the teachings of Jesus point towards that reality.

And what I want to suggest is looking through the lens of hope is like putting on those rose-tinted spectacles, not to look back at the past, but to look at the future.

Not in a way that denies the reality of pains and troubles of this life and the things that we might worry about, but actually focusing on those ultimate promises of God, such that those ultimate promises of life everlasting with him burn through the fog of the fears and everything that this life throws at us that might be described as in any way negative.

And that embracing hope, and this is the challenge to all of us, embracing hope is daring to look through those glasses, through that lens. I want to suggest that it's about having a sense of readiness.

[5 : 54] It's about having a sense of expectancy, and it's about being focused. Firstly, it is about being ready. And in those words that we read just now, it says that it will happen like a thief coming in the night.

It will be in an instant. We don't know how or when or exactly what that will look like, but we are promised that Jesus will return. We find that really hard to get our minds around how it will happen.

But it will happen. And that's the promise of Scripture. That the world won't just gradually, slowly disintegrate into meaningless chaos, although it might feel like that at times.

But God's got it in hand. And in an instant, he will return. Now, if we find that so hard to imagine, let's remember that our own individual personal ends actually will come, and we don't know when that's going to happen.

We will all die. Now, that might sound like a really bleak thing to be saying on a Sunday morning, or at any time. But let's be honest. It's a reality.

[7 : 12] What is the saying? Death and taxes. The only two things of which we can be absolutely sure. It will happen. Life is finite. And we don't know, none of us know, when that is going to happen for us.

So if we can grasp that reality, it's not such a greater reality, surely, to grasp that actually the same truth applies to the whole of the cosmos.

It will come to an end, or rather, it will come to a new beginning. And the call to Christian hope, to see things through that lens, is a call to readiness, that sense of being poised to knowing that it can happen at any time.

That's the first thing. The second thing is, it's about being expectant. Living in the light of the promises of God is about looking forward to the day of the Lord, as it's put in these verses that we read just now.

Living in the light of God's promise and eternal future. So what does it look like as a daily reality to do that, to live with that sense of expectancy?

[8 : 27] Well, living in hope in that way, and again, this is a challenge to all of us, has to do with the way in which our minds latch on to those images of hope.

See, when we talk about tomorrow, when we talk about the future, we are navigating pictures in our minds. When we think about the future, we think in pictures.

As a matter of fact, we think in pictures most of the time. I said there were going to be two thought experiments. Here's the second one. I'm going to tell you a story. On my way here this morning, I met a dog.

It was an ugly dog. And it was a big dog. And it was an aggressive dog. This thing wanted to bite me. And so I ran away from this dog, and it started to chase me.

And as I ran down the road, it was coming after me, and so I jumped onto a car. Okay, I'll stop there. I was making all of that up. Firstly, let me tell you that I absolutely love dogs, and I would actually find it really hard to describe any dog as ugly.

[9 : 34] The second thing is, I also know that actually, if a dog is looking aggressive, running away from it is probably not the best thing to do. But stay with me for the purposes of the illustration.

What was going on just now as I was telling you that story? I was feeding you a sequence of pictures. When I said I met a dog this morning, I doubt anybody in this room thought of the letters D-O-G.

You had a picture of a dog. You saw your cute, adorable dog. Except when I said it was an ugly dog, in which case it was no longer your dog.

When I told you it was a big dog, that little dog grew suddenly. And as I described this dog that was aggressive and it was chasing me down the street, you had this picture of this gnarly dog that was running after me along the road.

All along the while, all the while, I was feeding you pictures. I was affecting the pictures in your mind. If you have the wrong sort of information, you have the wrong sort of pictures in your mind.

[10 : 55] And if you have the wrong pictures in your mind, you have the wrong expectations of the future. Living in hope means seeing things through the right sort of pictures.

and this isn't always an easy thing for us to do. But the call to live in hope is to take those pictures that cause us so much fear and stress and trauma and to replace them with those ultimate pictures of hope.

Picture of light. Picture of life. The picture where every last tear is wiped away. Where there's no more death or dying or mourning or suffering.

Pictures that go far, far, far greater and deeper than the pictures that you started off this morning when I asked you think of something that represents happiest moment in your life so far.

I mean, think of that and times it by a million and you still don't even get close as to what eternity will be like according to the promises of God. It's not pie in the sky when you die.

[12 : 03] It's a picture of hope that is set before us in scripture. A picture of how Christ will return and make all things new. And our calling is to live in that sense of expectation that it will come to pass.

And when we have that picture in our mind when we allow that picture to navigate all the others all the other pictures as scary as they may be that we hold in our minds about the future and we carry with us fall into line and are put into that ultimate perspective as that image of resurrection hope that picture of hope burns through the fog and floods us with light.

But the last thing is we're called to be focused with this. What does that mean? To be focused to be focused means to look forward to look forward in hope with Jesus front and centre.

I'll share with you one last story. There's a story from years and years ago where a ship was brought in to harbour on a very very rough night.

The waves were crashing and it was there was it was very dark and the account that I'm going to read to you is the account of the it was actually the wife of the captain of the ship who was escorted from the ship onto land in the midst of the darkness.

[13 : 40] She said this that one man came to me and said do not be afraid I will take care of you. Her account reads like this.

He brought a peculiarly shaped dark lantern only single ray of light being emitted from a small circular opening.

Now said he take my hand hold fast do not fear do not look about you or on either side of you only on the little spot lighted by my lantern and place your footsteps firmly right there.

I heard the rushing of the waters and was still conscious of fear by looking steadily only where the light fell and planting my footsteps just there not turning either to the right or to the left clasping firmly the strong hand the danger was overcome and the shore reached in safety.

The next day my kind guide said would you like to see the way by which you came last night and then he showed me where our vessel had been lying and the very very narrow plank by which we had reached the shore he knew that I had turned either he knew that had I turned either to the right or to the left I should in all probability have lost my balance and gone over into those dark waters but by holding fast and treading just where the light fell all danger would be averted.

[15 : 47] Jesus front and centre as the light of the world he is the one that we are called to focus our hope on he is the one to set as the central image of hope in our hearts and in our minds and his promise is that when we do that there may still be fears lurking there may still be things that we know are out there as possibilities but his light of hope burns through the fog and the darkness and enables us to walk let's pray Lord thank you that you don't just leave us in this world and expect us to get on with it but you come to us in Jesus as the light of the world to lighten our darkness and to give us that direction to give us that focus

Lord would you be front and centre in our vision Lord help us to live in a way that is truly ready ready to meet with you in our daily lives may we live in a way that is truly expectant living in the light of your promises the light of that future that will be so amazing Lord may that picture of that future be at the centre of our minds in our everyday thinking that we might navigate our way forwards knowing that that future is in you so be at the centre of our lives be at the centre of our thinking be at the centre of our being this day and in whatever lies ahead over these coming days in

Jesus name we pray amen amen to to do ert away