

Let Hope Shine

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[0 : 00] Advent marks the four-week journey towards Christmas Day and the promise of Emmanuel, God with us. And in fact, that's exactly what Advent means.

It's coming. It's arrival. But it's a season of waiting on the Lord. And it reveals not only our human impatience with waiting, but it testifies to the deeper longing within our hearts that this world cannot fill.

Only Jesus can. And so I appreciate the Advent wreath because it represents so much of the deeper meaning of Christmas. The green, of course, speaks to the new life that Christ came to bring.

The red marks the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. And the purple speaks to Christ's royalty, that he is the King of Kings. And then the candles we light representing hope and peace and joy and love. And, of course, with the Christ candle right at the center, it truly is all about Jesus. And so Advent, what a wonderful opportunity to fix our hearts and our minds on Jesus.

[1 : 11] To invite God to do a sovereign work in us during the waiting. In our human nature, we prefer things to arrive on our timeline and in our way.

But Advent forces us to surrender our need for control. The temptation to just cram every square inch of our time with activities. And this season especially calls us to that.

Because something happens in God's hands. As we wait upon the Lord, our faith is refined. We realize that the deepest longing of our heart is Jesus.

And that he is surely worth the wait. And so let's begin with prayer. Lord, we thank you for the season of Advent. Because it teaches us to wait upon you.

Lord, the festivities are already going up. The lights and the decorations and all the trappings of the season. But, Lord, remind us that it is truly all about Jesus.

[2 : 11] And so we pray that as your word goes forth, that you would bless us. That you would accomplish all you have sovereignly ordained for your word in our lives. We give you this time in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen. This morning we look at the gift of hope. And our scripture, the very familiar words of Isaiah 9. We will be in verses 1 through 7. Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who are in distress.

In the past he humbled the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali. But in the future, he will honor Galilee of the nations by way of the sea beyond the Jordan. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. 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. 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.

[3 : 16] Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning. Will be fuel for the fire. 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.

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 is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So very familiar words. Especially around Christmas.

I always think of Handel's Messiah. Especially verses 6 and 7. But we cannot bypass the very bleak beginning of the chapter. Because they reveal why the coming of the Messiah is such good news for us and for this world.

[4 : 20] Because until the promise of the Savior, the news for God's people was very bad. And very dark. Look over those first two verses in chapter 9. The predominant image there is darkness.

How many of you like darkness? Well, we get our fill of it this time of year with the sun setting at 4 p.m. To put things in perspective, this is a picture of Barrow, Alaska.

And this does put our short days in perspective. I am from Alaska. But more from the southern area. If you could call any part of Alaska southern. Barrow, on the other hand, is at the northernmost tip of the state.

Right on the Arctic Ocean. And this particular picture has the dubious honor of being taken on November 18th. Almost two weeks ago.

Why is that a dubious distinction? Because it marks the final time the residents of Barrow will see the sun for the next 64 days. Total darkness.

[5 : 24] Until January 23. How would you like to be from Barrow, Alaska? But as discouraging as physical darkness, far more oppressive, of course, is spiritual darkness.

And that is what the prophet Isaiah here is describing. People living in a land of deep darkness. Oppressive. Bleak. Without hope. How did it get to this point?

For the people of God. Simply put, the Israelites had forsaken the Lord God. Over and over choosing a path of sin and rebellion. Chasing after idols.

Putting their hope in earthly things. Along the way, the people had repeatedly ignored the warnings of the prophets. And they had shrugged off the discipline of the Lord.

And darkness was the inevitable outcome. That's what happens when you move away from the source of light and love and hope. I wish I could say this kind of behavior in idolatry is only ancient history.

[6 : 24] But it's hardwired into our human DNA. How easily we are drawn away from the Lord. Putting our hope and trust in all kinds of earthly affections that have no power to save.

Much less to satisfy. How many of us think today our world is dark? In need of hope. In need of a savior. At the end of chapter 8.

Just before our passage. We see the depressing outcome of the people's disobedience. Distressed and hungry. They will roam through the land. When they are famished.

They will become enraged. And looking upward will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness. And fearful gloom.

And they will be thrust into outer darkness. Woo. Merry Christmas everyone. But that's a realistic picture of the effects of sin.

[7 : 21] And rebellion. And it reveals a very important spiritual truth. Putting our hope in this world eventually leaves us hopeless. We've all been there.

Putting our hope in things other than God. Chasing after worldly things. Even though they have no power to save. From a biblical perspective. This is our father's world.

And there are so many wonderful blessings that God pours out upon us. We just celebrated Thanksgiving. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. But none of the things of this world on their own can truly satisfy us.

And one of the strategies of the enemy is to magnify and corrupt the things of this world. Until they become idols in our hearts. Disordered affections. And the end result is they pull our hearts away from God.

And we enter into darkness and become hopeless. Well God's word calls us back to our first love. That our true hope is the Lord. Let's say this together.

[8 : 28] And now oh Lord for what do I wait? My hope is in you. In Isaiah 9 we see the turning point for the people of God. Something about hitting rock bottom.

Finding yourself in utter darkness that comes from our sinful disobedience. And it reminds me of Paul's description in Ephesians 2. Of our total depravity apart from the Lord.

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. Carrying out the desires of the body and of the mind and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

That's darkness. That's hopelessness. That's reality. Without a savior. But what are the very next words of Paul in that passage? But God in his mercy.

Into our total darkness and futility. God shines the light of hope. Nevertheless there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress in the past.

[9 : 29] He humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations. By way of the sea beyond the Jordan. Zebulun and Naphtali represented the northernmost tribes of Israel.

Who were the first to suffer the onslaught of the conquering Assyrians. This would be a very difficult season. But it marked God's discipline of his wayward people.

God's chastening can be painful. It's humbling. But it's also redemptive. It reminds us of who we are.

And who we belong to. That we were called to holiness. Not rebellion. And in the darkness we remember the promises of God. That because of his mercies we are not consumed.

Isaiah testifies that for the people there would come a day of freedom and redemption. And notice not only for Israel. But for Galilee of the nations. Meaning the Gentiles too.

[10 : 33] And ultimately the whole world. Even way up to Sheboygan and Appleton. The whole world. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of deep darkness.

A light has dawned. And who is that light? It's Jesus. Bible scholars here point to the prophetic perfect tense of these words.

In other words. This is a promise of future deliverance. Revealed in the midst of suffering and tribulation. But the prophecy is given as though it's already in effect.

That's the absolute certainty of God's promises. Not based on the darkness of our circumstances. But on the sure and unchanging character of God himself.

That's the difference between worldly hope and biblical hope. Worldly hope is ultimately depressing. It's a maybe. On the shifting sand of random happenstance.

[11 : 38] That doesn't sound very certain, does it? But that's the kind of hope that a lot of people look to in the world today. But biblical hope. That is based on the certainty of God's promises.

Which cannot be broken. And that's a foundation we can build our lives upon. Because our hope is in the loving and sovereign character of God. What an encouragement.

Maybe you've been despairing about the darkness of this world today. Maybe you've been walking through a dark valley yourself. From what may, as people of faith, we cling to God's promises.

Even as we await their future fulfillment. God said it, and I believe it. You've enlarged the nation and increased their joy.

They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest. As warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. There's a lot of joy in that verse. God reminding the people in the midst of their suffering.

[12 : 43] Of his covenant promise. To bless not only them, but the nations of the world. All nations. Through Abraham. This light would be for the whole world.

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. Every warrior's boot used in battle. And every garment rolled in blood.

Will be destined for burning. Will be fuel for the fire. The hard news. The hard news. Was that God would use the fearsome Assyrians. To discipline his people.

That's strong medicine. But the coming Messiah. Would usher in a peace. Where the agonies of war. Would be long forgotten. Who could bring such peace?

Well Midian's defeat. Reveals the answer. Harkening back to the improbable victory of Gideon. When he faced impossible human odds. But Gideon learning through all that.

[13 : 43] That the battle and the victory. Belongs to who? To the Lord. Only God could accomplish this kind of peace. And in verse 6.

The prophet reveals something very important. About biblical hope. That it is not based on a change of circumstances. And that's so often what we put our hope in.

Oh if only this aspect of my life could be different. No hope comes to God's people in the presence of our Savior. 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. Of the greatness of his government and peace. There will be no end. Isaiah two chapters earlier. Had already mentioned the name Emmanuel. But here in chapter 9.

[14:38] His identity is revealed. It's a child. But not just a child. A royal son of David. Who will rule the nations of the world. Who will be a wonderful counselor.

And wisdom and power. And everlasting father to his people. And the prince of peace. Can you imagine. God's ragged people.

Trudging through the darkness of despair. The painful discipline of the Lord. Via the Assyrians. How those words must have resonated. God will not forsake his people.

He will come. And shine light into the darkness. I want to pause here for a Hebrew word study. Yay. Hebrew word study.

And a personal testimony. That word there is. Kava. And can be translated. Wait. Or hope. In fact it's both. Isn't that interesting.

[15:38] That in God's economy. The two words. Are interconnected. That's different. From worldly waiting. Which tends to make us. Impatient. And frustrated.

But. As believers. In the hands of the Lord. Waiting is redeemed. We wait with hope. And expectation. Because the object. Because the object. Of our waiting.

Is God himself. What a beautiful. Theological truth. Bound up in this one word. The root of Kava. Means a literal. Binding.

Or twisting. Together. Together. And that captures the tension. Between. Worldly waiting. And godly waiting. We've all been there. On a human level.

How anxious. We can become. As we wait. For something. Tied up in knots. We might say. But biblical. Waiting. Is redeemed.

[16:33] As we put our hope. In the Lord. Our very lives. Become. Intertwined. With the Lord's. His promises. His character. His grace. In the waiting.

He strengthens us. He sustains us. He shapes us. I had a beautiful experience of this in my 20s. I had completed college.

But was at loose ends. I was living in Seattle. Working a dead end job. The strong relational community. That I enjoyed in college.

Had kind of dissipated. And I was trying in my own strength. To live well. To maintain my faith. But I felt like I was constantly letting God down.

And I was getting more and more tired. It was a midlife crisis at the age of 25. Well. My parents still lived up in Alaska. And invited me up for a visit.

[17:28] We drove down to the southern Alaska coast. And took a ferry across to a remote island. Beautiful. Peaceful place. Every afternoon I would take a walk through God's creation.

Breathing in fresh air. And gazing at wildlife. Sometimes I would talk to the Lord. Sometimes I didn't have much to say. But I sensed the Holy Spirit gradually softening.

And warming my heart. Well. The final day. We were set to leave mid morning. And I woke up early. And walked down to the beach. Just as the sun was rising up out of the water.

And I noticed a seagull. It was a windy blustery morning. And he was flapping his wings hard. Just trying to make a little bit of progress against the wind.

But then periodically a gust would swoop around and knock him back. I felt exhausted just watching him. But then. Further over the water.

[18:25] I spotted a bald eagle. He had a very different approach to the wind. But rather than struggling against it. He simply spread his vast wings.

And allowed the wind currents to carry him up and up and up. High above the earth. And then he would tuck in his wings. And zoom down to the water below. And catch a fish.

I was mesmerized. And then it struck me. I had been living like that seagull. For a long time. Trying so hard in my own strength.

To make progress. But constantly being buffeted. And knocked back by the headwinds of life. And my own flesh. Hopelessness. Yeah. That's what life in our own strength feels like.

But God is calling me to be like that eagle. To cooperate with the wind of the spirit. To allow his strength to carry me. And of course. What scripture came to mind.

[19:26] You read Isaiah 40. The beginning earlier. How about the end of the chapter. Let's read this together. Even youths grow tired and weary. And young men stumble and fall.

But those who hope in the Lord. Will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.

Of course. There's that word. Kava again. Hopeful waiting. With God. As the focus. Allowing our lives to be intertwined with his.

This world is too hard. To live in our own hope and strength. Amen. Waiting on the Lord. Putting our hope in him. We mount up with wings as eagles.

And I don't think it's a coincidence. That the direction of my life. Took on a much sharper. Ministry focus after that. In God's strength. Not mine.

[20 : 27] Waiting doesn't come naturally. To us. You could say our human nature. Is more prone to impatience. The message of our world is. Instant gratification.

Good. Waiting. Bad. But what if hope. Comes from the right kind of waiting. Not the passive. Helpless. Frustrated waiting.

Of our circumstances. To change. That kind of waiting. Reveals how little control. We have over anything. But waiting on the Lord. Putting our hope in him. That kind of waiting.

Is anything but. Passive. In our waiting upon God. We are fixing our eyes on him. We are in his word. We are praying. We are living according to his purposes. And we are putting our full trust. In his sovereign will. And from that place of. Hopeful waiting upon God. The spirit does a sovereign work in us. Aligning our hearts with his.

[21 : 23] He changes our perspective. And we realize our greatest hope. Is not in our circumstances. Changing. It is in God. Himself. That's how the message of Isaiah 9.

Is so radical. And hopeful. Is that the people walking in darkness. Will see a great light. And discovering that light. Is Christ.

Himself. So this first Sunday. In Advent. How is your hope. Neader. You may be feeling. Hopeless. Financially. Struggling to keep up. You may be. Dealing with some ongoing. Health issues. And your hope. Is wearing down. Are you struggling.

With relational problems. That you just can't seem to overcome. In your marriage. With your children. At work. Maybe you just feel. Hopeless. Or empty.

[22 : 18] Spiritually. Life has taken its toll. And the mantle. Is becoming too heavy. To bear. The light of the world. Did not just break into our darkness. 2,000 years ago.

He is a living savior. And his hope. And promises. Are for us. Today. The light. Still shines. In the darkness. And bound up.

In the season of Advent. Is the promise. That just as Jesus. Came once. He is surely. Coming again. And this time. It's to set. All things. Right. The darkness.

Will be banished. Forever. That is our ultimate. Hope. And it can sustain us. Through some of our hardest days. Titus 2.

13. We wait for the blessed hope. The appearing. Of the glory. Of our great God. And savior. Jesus Christ. As the old hymn says. What a glorious day.

[23 : 13] That will be. And so this. Advent. And Christmas. Surrounded as we are. By all the trappings. Of the season. May they all remind us.

And point us. To the true source. Of hope. Jesus Christ. Our Lord. Amen. Let's pray. Father. How we thank you.

That you love. Our broken. And dark world. So much. That you sent. Your only son. That whosoever. Believes in him. Would not perish. But have everlasting life.

Lord God. You know that we are dust. We are lost. Without you. We wander. From the path. Of life. We become weary. Sometimes even. Hopelessness. Sets in.

But in this season. Of waiting. We again. Put our hope. In you. Fixing our eyes. On Jesus. The author. And perfecter. Of our faith. And Lord. Let that hope. That you place. Within our hearts.

[24 : 08] Radiate out. So that people. Recognize Jesus. In us. And are encouraged. In their own faith. And so bless us. Lord. So that we can be a blessing. To others. We pray it all.

In Jesus name. Amen. Thank you.