

Advent: Sustaining Hope - 28th November 2021

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Date: 28 November 2021

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Good to see you today and welcome to Advent. This season of candles and calendars, which mark the fact that we're slowly but surely progressing in our preparation towards Christmas.

Advent, as Jane was saying, is traditionally a time of waiting, of expectation, of anticipating the significance of what God coming in the person of Jesus, God to be born with us, is all about. And so over these four Sundays of Advent, we're going to be using the four different words that are associated with the four candles on the front here.

We've got hope, love, peace and joy. Themes that we'll reflect on one at a time, week by week, as Advent progresses. So this week, as Erin was lighting the candle, we're going to think about hope. And in particular, I want us to consider what it means to have hope which sustains us, sustaining hope in the midst of the ups and downs of life.

[1 : 01] And so to get us going, we're going to turn to the Bible for a start and a passage from Matthew's Gospel, chapter one, in which Matthew lists the family tree of Jesus, a list of ancestors known as a genealogy.

We'll watch a video of that reading. It's a clip which has the backdrop, though, of a kind of teenage or 12-year-old Jesus, probably, a coming-of-age ceremony for him, surrounded by his extended family at the time.

Mary's in there, Zechariah's in there, and so on. Kind of early bar mitzvah is the background to this reading from Matthew, if you like. But here's the genealogy that Matthew opens his Gospel with. This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac, the father of Jacob. Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah, the father of Perez and Zerach, whose mother was Tamar.

[2 : 06] Perez, the father of Hezron. Hezron, the father of Ram. Ram, the father of Aminadab. Aminadab, the father of Nashon.

Nashon, the father of Salmon. Salmon, the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

Obed, the father of Jesse. And Jesse, the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife.

Solomon, the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam, the father of Abijah. Abijah, the father of Asa. Asa, the father of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat, the father of Jehoram. Jehoram, the father of Uzziah. Uzziah, the father of Jotham. Jehoram, the father of Ahaz.

[3 : 07] Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah, the father of Manasseh. Manasseh, the father of Amon. Amon, the father of Josiah.

And Josiah, the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon, Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel.

Shealtiel, the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel, the father of Abihuod. Abihuod, the father of Eliakim. Eliakim, the father of Azul.

Azul, the father of Zadok. Zadok, the father of Akim. Akim, the father of Elihud. Elihud, the father of Eleazar.

Eleazar, the father of Mathan. Mathan, the father of Jacob. And Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. And Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

[4 : 14] Thus, there were 14 generations in all, from Abraham to David. 14 from David to the exile to Babylon.

And 14 from the exile to the Messiah. There we go. I'm glad there were visuals to accompany that. I didn't want to fancy reading that one this morning, partly because the names are blooming complicated to get your heads around.

But we could be forgiven if we hear that just in isolation with that. I don't have any sort of visuals to it. It's a pretty tedious list of ancient names, a kind of roll call of Jesus' family tree.

And yet Matthew starts his whole gospel, his good news, with this list, this genealogy, for numerous reasons. Not least, I think, to illustrate that Jesus' family tree, Jesus' ancestors, were a pretty messed up, pretty mixed up bunch of people.

Some, we know, behaved atrociously. Some were treated atrociously. But in terms of Jesus' family history, as we look through the Bible from what we know, we're in proper sort of Game of Thrones territory here, with some of the dysfunctional goings-on.

[5 : 29] So, for example, you've got Jacob early on, who stole his brother's birthright, who was then tricked into marrying the sister of the woman he wanted to marry.

One of their sons, Judah, had sex with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute. You've got Rahab, who was a prostitute. David, Rahab's great-great-grandson, committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then had her husband killed in order to cover up the affair.

Their son, Solomon, was a slave trader and a sex addict. The Bible doesn't say he's a sex addict, but he had over 700 wives and concubines and so on. So you kind of presume that was the motivation for it.

You've got Ahaz and Manasseh. They burned their children to death. And so on, and so on, and so on. It's a kind of who's who of atrocity, really. Jesus' family tree.

Yes, there were a few decent people along the way. But, blimey, these were countered by some pretty shady characters in that list, too. So why does Matthew give us the details to start his gospel of Jesus' family tree, warts and all?

[6 : 41] Well, I'd say it's Matthew's way of trying to give us hope. No matter who we've come from, whatever mistakes have been made in the past, whatever history or humiliation we might be carrying, none of it is too much, too muddy or too messy for God to work through, for God ultimately, as with Jesus, to bring something better, something beautiful out of.

God is in the business of redeeming the past by eventually bringing new light, new life, new hope, to quote Star Wars, into being.

And that's on a personal level. But this genealogy is also, I think, Matthew's way of giving us hope as a collective in a sort of corporate way, too. You see, starting from Abraham, as he does, right through to Jesus, the Israelites, the people of God, this community of faith, had been through some pretty turbulent times as a people group.

Now, much of it was arguably their own making, the wrong decisions they'd make about how they as a people should live under God. But still, as a people, they'd suffered terribly from wars, invasions, mass slaughter at times.

They'd been enslaved. They'd been exiled. They'd lost their homeland. They'd returned to it to find it in ruins. And then by the time of Jesus, they found themselves under control of the Roman Empire, one of the most repressive and cruel regimes of all time.

[8 : 24] And yet, in spite of these collective circumstances, still, says Matthew, there was this golden thread of hope which remains strong, a family line which would one day produce the Messiah, this long-awaited saviour.

Indeed, for Matthew, the arrival of Jesus was the fulfilment of all sorts of prophecies, most famously, perhaps, of Isaiah, who said this.

To us, a child is born, to us a son is given, and a 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.

And so with ancient prophecies like this in mind, and with the genealogy of Jesus indicating the new era which Jesus' arrival ushers in, I guess the expectation of Advent is that with Jesus having now come, as Jane was saying, we're called to live in hope.

[9 : 41] Hope for witnessing God's redemption and renewal on a personal level, in our relationships and so on, but also on a corporate level where peace and justice and righteousness are the kingdom ways which Jesus is building.

Hope is an essential part of God's story with us, a quality through Jesus which we're called to embody and embrace. And yet, as hopeful, I think, as Advent is meant to be, and as hope-filled, as life with Jesus is meant to make us, what do we do if we're struggling with the whole idea of hope at the moment?

And what are we to make of this whole faith journey if we're instead feeling somewhat hopeless in these current times?

You see, if that's you, if you do feel somewhat hopeless, if as you watched the news conference yesterday and you think, here we go again, I need you to know that you're not alone in that.

In fact, if I'm honest, I'm probably with you on that, that struggle to keep hopeful. Life is hard in these times.

[11:05] Hope is hard in these times. Why? Well, an obvious answer we'd all say first off is the pandemic. But I think if we unpack that a bit, I'd suggest it's not just the pandemic, it's specifically perhaps that the trauma of the pandemic, which in particular has knocked our hope.

You see, I wouldn't be surprised if a good number of us are in some way displaying varying degrees of post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Not disorder, not necessarily PTSD, but symptoms which are associated with the experience of living through trauma.

What are these post-trauma symptoms? Well, they can include things like this. Shock, denial, or disbelief, confusion, difficulty concentrating, anger, irritability, mood swings, anxiety, and fear, guilt, shame, self-blame, withdrawing from others, feeling disconnected or numb, feeling sad or hopeless. Any of those sound familiar to you of late? I won't ask for a show of hands, but I suspect most, if not all of us, could identify with at least some of these stressed trauma symptoms.

[12:36] I know I certainly can. Indeed, for me, I think I'm definitely aware of heightened anger and irritability of wanting to withdraw from others, of feeling disconnected, of feeling sad, and as we've been saying, I definitely, at times, feel pretty hopeless.

And there may be crossover with depression for some of us with this, and these symptoms may fluctuate over time, but it's the trauma, I would say, of these last 20 months or more which may well account for how many of us may be feeling.

And I say this is something worth recognizing in ourselves because if we can give a name to what we're experiencing, it's a first step towards understanding it, and understanding is something I think we do well to pursue.

It says in Proverbs, wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom, and in all you're getting, get understanding. See, if we can understand the reasons for, say, a sense of hopelessness, well that may well just be the trigger for us to find a renewed sense of hope.

For example, although we may put our lack of hope down to a loss of faith at the moment, actually our feelings of hopelessness may not be an indication that we've lost our faith at all, but instead are a perfectly natural response to the trauma that we've experienced.

[14:16] And I say it's important, therefore, that we don't beat ourselves up if we feel our faith has gone, or if it's evaporated somewhat. God certainly doesn't want us to do that, because it may simply be that our ability to express or process that faith, that hope, is currently being hindered by the fallout from the trauma that we've been experiencing.

So ironically, deepening our understanding of the trauma which has prompted our sense of hopelessness may well be a way of beginning to renew our hope, to renew our faith in God.

So post-traumatic stress symptoms may hinder our hope. What else can hinder our hope? Well, I know for me, my hope gets bashed, if you like, when I enter into the weight of what other people are carrying, so that my own sense of hope becomes harder to maintain.

For example, I'm going to share a few things, which are a kind of indication of where I'm at at the moment. It does get more positive, I promise you. But it's been a particularly tough few weeks to carry at the moment, in my role in particular.

Tough weeks could you come off, obviously, a tough year and a half or so of COVID as well. And if I can level with it, I feel kind of at my limit, my capacity of what I can cope with at the moment.

[15:44] It's not through any lack of support or encouragement from you. As a church, I couldn't ask for a more supportive, encouraging bunch of people. Rather, it's the events that I'm experiencing or vicariously experiencing with people, which have left me struggling sometimes for hope.

So, on a national scale, I'm quite a news addict, really. I love my Twitter feed, which is sort of bit of sweet for me, I know. And I'll say this this morning, and I've said it before, but I'll probably say it again.

But each week, when I watch the news, our government's actions leave me feeling more hopeless for the future of our country than ever.

That when we needed a government of competency, we've got one of corruption. When we most needed a government of compassion, it seems you've got one of cruelty. And that brings me down. So, for example, demonising and denying those who have a legal right to claim asylum in our country by closing all regular routes for safe passage and instead forcing them to place their lives in the hands of human smugglers and inflatable dinghy.

[16:55] disease has led to the deaths we've seen this week. I mean, what are we becoming as a nation when people who want to come here to claim asylum are forced to risk their lives and their children's lives because the passage across the channel is the only one available to them?

In what way can our treatment of asylum seekers possibly be defined as loving our neighbour as ourselves? So that brings me down.

That shatters my hope in the way our country is being run. But then on a more local level, being alongside people in their grief and their hurt means I'm sometimes struggling to find the hope in their situation.

For example, and this is really just to give you an insight into the kind of things as to why sometimes hope for me is difficult. I'm thinking of a funeral I took this week for a neighbour of ours who died of skin cancer complications.

Skin cancer which could have been spotted earlier had she been able to access anything other than a telephone appointment with her doctor. It's not the NHS's fault.

[18:10] It's a consequence of COVID restrictions, yeah, but equally a consequence of years of chronic underfunding which have pushed the health service to the brink of collapse. I'm trying to offer her grieving husband hope in the funeral and in the visits and stuff, but that's hard when he's grieving the death of his wife in circumstances that he feels were unfair.

What else? I'm thinking of the local woman who I was told about who's had a baby but who is currently waiting for a paternity test result to see if the father of her child was her own father who'd raped her.

Now I know God offers hope in those kind of circumstances, not least with that new life. The genealogy of Jesus tells us as much, but right now if I put myself in that woman's place, I'm struggling to see the hope for her.

Or then I'm thinking about the funeral that I'm due to take next Monday at St. Anne's for an 18-year-old woman called Courtney who died in a car accident, as did her 19-year-old fiancé, Jack, who was in the car with her.

Courtney was in the army, so it's going to be a big military funeral with 70 soldiers going to line the road down to St. Anne's. There's union flags and gun salutes and all the formality which comes with a kind military funeral.

[19:47] But this week, as I sat with Courtney's parents down in Chasetown, and I know Courtney's mum from Novik, hence why I've been asked her to take the funeral, but these poor parents, they can't even begin to comprehend the loss that they're feeling with their 18-year-old daughter now gone.

How could they? Deep down, I know for her, I know for Courtney that there's ultimate hope in Jesus, and that's what we'll be putting into the funeral.

But a week in advance of this funeral, I'm struggling to know how to offer or find the words to express that hope in a way which will help. It feels hopeless when they're just in bits, because their daughter and their fiancé have both died.

There's a lot of heavy stuff at the moment. You'll have stories of other things I know. So I almost want to sort of apologise in a way if I'm not quite at the races with things at the moment, with meeting up with some of you who's asked to and so on.

It's not that I don't want to. It's just as I say, I feel like in some ways I'm at my capacity at the moment with that. I'm taking some time out this week for a bit of a retreat, which is much needed.

[21:08] And I want to use that time to just be on my own with God, to ask him to restore my hope with the stuff that is going on at the moment.

But I know I won't be alone in that struggle of feeling life, death, everything in between. Sometimes it strips us of the ability to feel hopeful.

Hopeful. I don't want to leave it there. So how might we be sustained in our hope in this season that we're in and beyond?

And I want to be practical, really. I don't want to just say our hope is in Jesus. Isn't that great? Of course that's true. But it's got to be more grounded than that, I think, as well.

Jesus grounds us in using our minds, in using our experience to work out how to be hopeful as well. As I said earlier, one way to understand the trauma that's perhaps prompted our loss of hope, and what that's important is that can take the pressure off us feeling that it's our fault if we've lost faith or whatever.

[22 : 20] Yes, we may well need to grieve the trauma, lament what's been lost and so on. But as I say, understanding that that loss of hope is primarily due to the external trauma we've been experiencing, that can bring renewed hope and a fresh start for our journey.

But I just want to cover one thing really extra this morning, that there are other strategies, other ways in which God can help to restore and renew our sense of hope even in the midst of pain and trauma and of anxiety.

And I think there's one key word which is probably useful for where we're at with this. One key way I would say God works to sustain our hope is through our ability to accept where we are.

The power of acceptance. Now what do I mean by this? Well to put it bluntly, it means accepting I think that we are where we are in all of life's complexities and challenges.

acceptance means not comparing where we are now with what we had before in some sort of nostalgic, rose-tinted way. But neither does it mean I think wishing away the present in order to get to some idealized future.

[23 : 42] Now if Advent, if the coming of Jesus in our time and space tells us anything, it's that the here and now is where God's spirit is most active.

We are where we are. And I'd suggest God is encouraging us not to be resigned to that fact, but instead to find God's hope in the present where we are.

Now how do we do that? Well there's a great passage in the book of Jeremiah, a time when the Israelites have been taken into exile in Babylon. It's from that time that we get those songs like by the rivers of Babylon where we sat down, there we wept, we remembered Zion and so on.

In exile, these boney M channeling Israelites. They could have lost all hope. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? They said they couldn't even sing because they were so hopeless at the time.

But the prophet Jeremiah, he sends a letter to these exiles which says this. He says, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

[25 : 00] Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters.

increase in number there. Do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper. See, God, through Jeremiah, is effectively saying to these exiled, traumatized, hopeless people, we are where we are.

So in the nicest possible way, let's get on with it. Let's make the best of a bad lot. Build houses, plant gardens, eat together.

In other words, don't stop planning for the future just because your circumstances in the present are less than ideal. Don't just grin and bear it.

[26 : 11] Live. In some ways, I know that kind of sounds counter intuitive in that if we're feeling hopeless, why would we want to invest our time in building a future?

But according to Jeremiah, at least, and I think deep down, we know this. We actually find hope in choosing to live with hope.

So building a house, planting a garden, eating together, making plans for the future, getting stuck into community or church life, committing to a group, arranging still to go out with friends, volunteering with, but would be a friend, serving other people and so on.

It's all about deliberately choosing to do things which suggest hope. Even if we don't initially feel hopeful, that can be the very spark we need to help us rediscover that living, sustaining hope.

Not just for ourselves, but for us in our relationship with God and with each other. We may not feel like our faith is alive, but if we can act in ways which suggest it is, that may be the trigger which enlivens our faith.

[27 : 26] Just see what I'm trying to say. You know, for me, I think I'm almost surprised at myself. I've got all this flatness going on. I'm not, you know, I'm not trying to cover that.

But in the midst of everything at the moment, when I look ahead to 2022, I'm actually quite excited about 2022. I could do with Christmas getting out of the way, to be honest. I'm not too bothered about Christmas.

That will be what it will be and we'll make of it what we will. It's more 2022 that I'm looking forward to and the opportunities that might bring in time to rekindle some of the normality we hope can be. So I'm looking forward to in particular. I've missed the church socials. I've missed Curry Club. You know, that eating together, that cooking food together, that sharing time. I don't know quite when they can happen in 2022, but I miss that.

That's what I'm looking forward to rekindling because I know that's church as much as any kind of Sunday gathering or singing or whatever is. And for me, it's all vicar.

[28 : 30] I know 2022 will be an opportunity to properly collate and roll out these ways to serve forms, which I'm grateful so many of us have filled in and returned.

Those forms will make rolling things out in 2022 more possible in whatever ways we can. That's for me. Curry Club is my hope in some ways.

What about for you? What about for you? I wonder as you sit here, what positive things might God be calling you to make an intentional investment in, in spite of, in the middle of the rubbish that we're going through at the moment?

Whether that's church connected, community connected, family, home life, whatever it is, there is a future. And I wonder for you, what future might God want to build with you?

Because that future will in time feed and nurture a sense of sustaining living hope in each of us.

[29 : 37] God works through the practical as much as the spiritual. And that's all I've got for us today. It's not rocket science, I guess, but that's what I feel it's worth dwelling on.

And I just want to finish with a quote from a therapist and author, KJ Ramsey, who says this. She says, biblical hope is expressed, not in certainty, but in curiosity.

It is expressed in hearts that acknowledge and accept Jesus is already king. In lives that look for restoration of his rule right here.

And in people propelled by a willingness to see Jesus care for and cure every inch of creation.

So I guess my prayer for us is a simple one. That we would know hope this Advent through Jesus, through each other, through the future that God gives us a vision for.

[30 : 43] And if we haven't yet got the vision for that future, God would give us the practical ways to put that vision beginning into practice. Thank you.