

HOPE FOR EVERYONE - ADVENT 1
ISAIAH 58:1-12; ACTS 10:36-38; MATTHEW 15:12-13
DECEMBER 1, 2024

We haven't finished with our series on the Apostles' Creed, but as they say on TV, we'll interrupt this programming to bring you breaking news. The arrival of December coincides with the sure arrival of Advent—at least until Christ returns—which is what Advent is about, both His second coming as well as His first arrival in Bethlehem. We'll resume the Apostles' Creed series after Advent.

Because Advent draws our attention to Christ's return, it naturally points us to end times—the time of the apocalypse. There are a number of **common elements in the apocalyptic literature**. The writings speak of **a divine Messiah** who will come into the world, **preceded by Elijah**, who will **make all things right**. There will be **agonizing times ahead** and relationships will be **shattered** because of the prevalence of **hatred**. The last days will be a **time of judgment** and the **Jews will be drawn back to Jerusalem** from their various locations around the world. The **Gentiles will either be destroyed or converted**. **The New Jerusalem will come down from heaven**, beautiful beyond description and then there will be a **great battle where God overcomes evil and the golden age of God will arrive**.

As terrifying as all of that is, there will be **blessings as well**. The **earth will be luxuriant**. **Animals will be at peace** with each other (the lion will lie down with the lamb) **and with humanity**. There will be peace; **wars will cease**. There will be an **end to sorrow, fatigue and pain**. A time of **righteousness and holiness** will be ushered in.

That's some of the thinking we might want to keep in mind as we focus on hope this Sunday. **Advent in its traditional sense focuses on the hope the prophets conveyed, the hope expressed in their faithfulness through adversity and humiliation to declare the truth of God, to declare the will of God and to proclaim the coming Messiah**. I mentioned last week that Muslims consider Jesus to be a prophet, but a failed one because He died. We mean something much more when we speak of Him as a prophet, because He is the only person ever to be prophet, priest and king. **Jesus has always been the hope of the prophets and the hope of the Church. But even that is too limiting; Jesus is the hope of the world**.

We have hope in Him because:

He has come to redeem His people.

He has come to rescue us from our sinful ways and to defeat the devil

He has come to exchange our sin for His glory and His righteousness—remember that great **passage last week from 2 Corinthians 5:21**.

He has come to give us eternal life.

He has come to make all things new.

He has come to make us right with God and with each other.

He has come to show us the way.

He has made that way **by grace**. It is His gift to an undeserving people—us. We cannot earn it.

Wouldn't you say that's all very good news? It is, in fact, **the good news of the Gospel!** It is the great hope of the Church and it is why we gather week after week in joyful adoration—because of our hope in Jesus Christ and what He has accomplished for us.

Today's Scripture reading from Isaiah is an interesting mix to say the least. It begins like a **reverse lament, not from us to God but from God to us**. "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet." **So far, so good.** But the next line strikes to the heart. "Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins." **It gets worse:** "For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them." The "as if" sounds very ominous. **Something is very wrong with this picture.**

And then the real lament starts, this time from the people to God—but it's still God speaking what He hears His people saying: "God, what's the point in our fasting and humbling ourselves & You haven't even noticed?" Well, since you asked, says God, "When you fast, you continue to do as you please and exploit people and quarrel with each other. You can't behave like that and still expect Me to listen. You're just going through the motions when you bow your heads like that."

Ouch! "OK, listen up! Here's what I'm really looking for. If you want My attention, then loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke to set the oppressed free; share your food with the hungry, provide shelter for the poor and clothe the hungry. Don't ever turn away from anyone in need.

If you do this, then your light will shine, you will be healed and your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then **when you call**, I will answer; **when you cry** for help you will hear me say, 'Here I am'. **If you do these things**, I will always guide you and satisfy your needs and strengthen you. And more than that, **you will be called** 'Repairer of Broken Walls' and 'Restorer of Streets With Dwellings'."

Wow! Would you like to be blessed? Would you like to be in the very centre of God's heart? **Here's the recipe.** Today we share in the hope that the prophets foretold. Isaiah is certainly first among them. He is the one who tells us that the Messiah will be born of a virgin. He is the one who tells us that the people living in darkness have seen a great light, for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government or authority will be on His shoulders. He will be called Wonderful Counsellor (or Wonderful, Counsellor), Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He will reign on David's throne forever, establishing righteousness and justice. **It's Isaiah who foretells** in detail of Jesus' sacrificial and saving death on the cross for us. **But here he is telling us what's wrong with our "business as usual" worship.**

We need to reach out to others. We don't reach out to new people because we need them to come in; we reach out because they need what, who we have and know—**Jesus Christ.** **When we reach out**

to the least and the last and the lost, then the real hope that is in Jesus Christ is theirs too. Then there is hope for everyone—doing good and healing all, as Acts says.

When it comes to any message about hope, Romans 15:12-13 should be right at the top of Scriptures to be heard:

“And again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jessie will spring up, One who will rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in Him. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’”

Truth and proof. Imagine Jesus going into the towns and villages proclaiming His Gospel without accompanying acts of healing and helping. **We need to be like Jesus, out in our community connecting with people with acts of amazing love - while at the same time connecting them to a God of amazing grace. Now that's good news and hope!** It isn't that our message isn't compelling; our problem is **more often that we aren't compelling messengers. Because we've lost our historic place of privilege in Christendom, to tell the truth, we need to show the truth. Jesus met needs; people listened. Before churches can be heard** we must be trusted, and **that means first showing our ability to love.** To see what you value—**look at your check book and calendar.** Where do you spend your money and time? **Does it reflect what Jesus valued?**

Here's the key for today. How can we become the “soul” of the community? If we shut down would we be greatly missed by the community? Somehow get involved in the community, share authentic relationships and be truly useful. Then we earn the right to be heard. Make the community a better place to live. A church needs to build a bridge to the community, not a wall around itself. It doesn't shout at the dirty water; it gets in the water and begins cleaning it up. I want to say two things here very clearly. First, I'm not saying any of this to make anyone feel inadequate in any respect. Many of you are already doing these kinds of things. So this message is to encourage you to keep going on this track and to thank you for what you've been doing and continue to do. Second, you individually are the church—you are also collectively the church. The church doesn't just impact the community by great, “we gotta' do” projects. We can impact the community—each of us—one person at a time.

While we can't be everything to everybody, we can seek to help those on the margins who are struggling. Back to hope: **Bring others the hope of the prophets, right to their door-step.** Our hope, the hope God gives, can be their hope. Because the special messages of Advent come at a time when people tend to be spiritually-minded, invite them to join us to hear the hope that Jesus has brought into the entire world.