

***Devoted to Jesus, Our Hope***

Trinity CRC, Dec. 2, 2018 AM

First Sunday of Advent (HOPE), Theodore Bentum baptism

**Luke 2:25-35, Isaiah 2:1-5**

Rev. Richard J. deLange

Dear people of God,

Those who hope in Christ can show amazing devotion. You may have heard this story in the public news recently. People are astounded that 27 year old John Allen Chau died on November 17 while attempting to spread Christianity to the protected island of North Sentinel which is ruled by India. He prepared himself in many different ways but knew this was a risky mission. Nonetheless, he was ready to die in the name of loving these people. I have questions about his method and timing but not about his hope in Christ.

Going back a few years, the Smashing Pumpkins song *Jellybean* gives us a view of the kind of hopelessness that is present in our world. The words reflect reality for many people today.

Welcome to nowhere fast  
nothing here ever lasts  
nothing but memories  
of what never was.

We're nowhere, we're nowhere, we're nowhere to be  
nowhere, we're nowhere, we're nowhere to see.

Living makes me sick  
so sick I wish I'd die  
down to the belly of the beast  
I can't lie.

Pretty depressing. A person who has no hope gives up on living. Some are young, confused about the purpose of life. Others are old, and sick of life's heartaches. Some struggle with mental illness and feel like they are constantly in a dark tunnel with no light at the end. Some are so tired of trying to please other people that they'd just as soon be dead. Some have such a tight budget they are fighting hard to keep their head above water and don't feel like fighting anymore. Others feel the same way about demands at school or work or home. And for others who live with regrets for past actions, being dead seems better than living with the heavy yoke of guilt or shame around your neck. Every week in the news we hear stories of murder by people who feel trapped, or in over their heads and resort to violence against others. And so it is when you and I lose hope. We can't see a good way out.

Hope changes everything. We all need hope. The people Isaiah spoke to needed lots of it. In fact, if you found yourself living in Jerusalem about 750 years before Jesus, your heart would start pumping a little faster when you heard Isaiah speak the words we read from chapter 2. Your mind would start to race with excitement. You'd have hope that things would get better. This message would boost your spirit and encourage you to keep going.

If you've ever wanted something that you couldn't afford or couldn't reach, then you're in a better position to understand the Christian faith. Maybe Jesus tells us to become like little

children because kids are almost always at the mercy of someone bigger. Kids don't have much money to buy things that they hope to have. And often children are so small they can't reach things up high on the shelf. They can ask for help and only hope that someone will eventually stop to help.

Until you get what you want, you just have to wait. Advent is about waiting. During the advent season we look forward to something that we can't reach in our own strength. During the weeks leading up to Christmas we anticipate the coming Christ child. Advent helps us remember that Jesus did come but not because we reached him and pulled him down from the top shelf. No, God came to us on his own to rescue us from our hopelessness and give us new life.

### **The bad news: Hopelessness**

For our first point this morning, we need to see the bad news, summarized as hopelessness. The bad news is that at the time of this prophecy, Israel has two problems. On the spiritual level, God has a lot of harsh things to say to his people in Isaiah 1, things they don't recognize about themselves. But, then, it's always hardest to look at ourselves and see what God sees. If your Bible is open, just look at what God says about Israel in Isaiah 1. He calls them *rebellious* in v.2, *dumb* in v.3, *corrupt* in v.4, *evil* in v.16. And there's more. In summary, though, he faults Israel for trying to live without him, for trying to take care of herself and, in the process, doing more harm than good.

I like Mr. Bean. Did you see ever that Bean movie where he takes the painting of Whistler's Mother from England to California? After getting it to the museum in California he accidentally sneezes on it. Then in typical Bean fashion he panics and tries to dry it off but smears the old lady's face, ruining the million-dollar work of art. Spiritually speaking, sin messes up our lives and when we try to fix it ourselves we only make matters worse. In Isaiah's day, to use the Bean illustration, you might say that Israel is so spiritually sick that she's sneezing over the law of God and his word from the prophets and further messing up her life in the process. We can't fix our problems by ourselves. On our own, we are spiritually hopeless.

On the physical side, Israel watches Assyria, her neighbour to the East. The enemy is gaining strength and threatening Israel's national security. Eventually, Assyria sweeps over Israel's neighbour Aram and then comes into Israel itself. The sound of war—and certainly the rumour of it coming closer—is all you hear in Jerusalem. There are no long-range missiles and stealth aircraft like we've seen North Korea display in recent years. Swords and spears and bows and arrows make up the weapons of war. The weapons are different today, as is the scale of damage, but war and the threat of it is horrible. The Assyrian enemy is strong, conquering every neighbour and now she's closing in on Israel too. The situation looks hopeless.

As time goes on, God's people find themselves paying taxes to foreigners and living under Assyria's laws. It isn't ultimate humiliation but it's close. The future doesn't look promising. The people of God feel like you and I might feel at times when the bank threatens to foreclose, or the doctor says, "It's bad." When you can't seem to stop returning to your

addiction. Or when you feel your physical strength diminishing with age, or you don't know where to turn anymore to deal with the crying children. We all get afraid sometimes. Our situation feels hopeless. And that's a bad state to be in.

## **The Good News: Hope**

Hope, after all, is what keeps us going. And in this story, the bad news of chapter one gives way to the good. So, secondly, we want to consider the good news which, in a word, is hope. And the good news for the child of God is that there is a definite light at the end of the tunnel. There's hope.

We've all used the word hope in the sense of wishful thinking. Two farmers talk together about the bad weather and one of them says, "I sure hope the weather improves." But that's not Christian hope. And when a little girl says, "I hope I get that new doll for Christmas" it's just a wish. Moreover, if the kid comes from a very poor family, it's just a pipedream because Santa Claus isn't real and money doesn't grow on trees.

We must understand something as Christians. When the Bible talks about hope it is always a certainty. Hope and certainty go hand in hand. That's because our hope is built on God's faithfulness and based on Jesus' completed work for us. When God makes a promise, you don't have to question whether he will come through on his side of the deal. He will! When he says, as he does in Isaiah 2:2, that the temple will be a centre of worship for peoples of all nations, and that peace shall be the way of his kingdom, then you and I don't have to doubt for a moment that God will do what he said. Our hope is certain.

Isaiah first pointed to a restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. That was fulfilled after the Jewish exile when the temple was rebuilt. But it also points to Jesus' first coming to defeat sin as the Messiah who replaces human temples by becoming the new temple. He is the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He is our ultimate hope. Jesus becomes our pathway to full restoration with God.

Old Simeon is an example of a man who had certain hope that the Messiah was undoubtedly coming to be our restorer. He had God's record in the Old Testament and somehow God specially revealed to him through the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah. Simeon steadfastly clung to God's word and waited patiently, fully devoted to God and full of hope. That's why he spoke so confidently when he took the Christ child in his arm and praised God saying,  
*Lk 2:30 "for my eyes have seen your salvation."*

Up till that moment he was living in the hope of God's coming Messiah. He lived in the certainty that God would come through on his promise. And we now live like that in the certain hope of Christ's second coming, a greater day of fulfillment when God's children gather around his throne and when Christ comes and makes all things new.

## **The Basis of Our Hope**

And that brings us, thirdly, to consider the basis of our hope. Isaiah 2 is a hope-filled prophecy. After hearing the bad news in Isaiah 1, God gives his people the good news through

Isaiah that points us to Jesus as the basis for our hope, just as Simeon knew it. If Jesus had not come the first time in order to die for our sins, then we'd have no hope that life will ever be better or more meaningful.

You see, dear people, life is moving toward a climax in the kingdom of God. It was inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus and it will be fulfilled at his return. This means Jesus' changes the focus of our life. Just look at how Isaiah describes the impact of Jesus. In v.3, a few lines down, he says,

*Is 2:3 "He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.*

He foresees the law of God living in our hearts and transforming our lives. In v.4, Jesus is seen as the judge to settle disputes that will result in peace. His coming changes how we live with each other. And then we get those familiar words that God's people

*"will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."* And wars will cease.

It is happening already, even though it's not always as easy to see as it will be when Christ comes again. But don't kid yourself. It's already here. You can point to a young man like John Chau who is selflessly devoted to sharing Christ's love with others, even if it costs him his life—which it did. I think of many people I've known who lived in bondage to drugs or alcohol, but with Christ's grace and strength, they sought help and are living new lives today and their families are enjoying life in a whole new way that they never thought possible before. Mark Earley, the one-time President of Prison Fellowship told the story of Steve Watt and Mark Farnham. If you saw them together today, you'd observe the interaction of Christian brothers who are the best of friends. But their friendship didn't begin that way. The first time Steve and Mark met was on a lonely highway. Steve, a Wyoming highway patrolman, stopped Mark who had just robbed a bank. Mark, wanting to get away, slammed on the brakes, jumped out of his car with a pistol, and started firing. Five out of the six shots hit Steve, and one of Steve's hit Mark.

Mark was given a life sentence, and Steve went back to the patrol, but he had changed. He nearly shot one motorist as he pulled out his billfold: Steve saw a revolver. He needed to leave the highway patrol, and he grew angrier and angrier. Finally Steve's wife, Miriam, a policewoman, gave him some hard counsel: forgive. Since the shooting Steve had become a Christian, and he knew Miriam was right. He needed to confront Mark and forgive him. Unless he did, he'd never stop being a victim.

At a prison evangelistic meeting, that confrontation occurred. Steve walked across the stage and hugged Mark, who had also come to faith in Christ. "I'm glad I didn't kill you," he said, and a deep friendship began. Steve recalls how he, the victim, felt after he was reconciled with Mark: "It was like God just picked up a semi-truck right off me, and I actually started living." (BreakPoint Commentary)

That's a hope-filled, modern day swords-to-plowshares story. It's a story of Jesus breaking into our world again in sure and certain ways, changing lives. You know, young people and boys and girls, our God loves his people so much. And he so much wants to get us to heaven, to be with him for eternity because our sin has robbed us of so much of the joy

and peace and goodness that God intends for us to enjoy. That's why Jesus had to come—to restore us to God and to give us hope for a better life. But it's not just for the future. It will be complete and full in the future. But it's for us already now as we put our trust in Jesus and devote our lives to resting in his grace. Being devoted to Christ and getting our strength from him, enables us to see him do the things we thought were impossible: giving courage to overcome our demons, giving love to help us forgive and heal, helping us in different ways to experience the power of Christ breaking into our world and renewing us.

Isaiah paints a hope-filled picture for his listeners. A glorious temple, chief among the nations. Seen for miles around from atop the high mountain. It is full, with people streaming to it from all nations. Many will come, says Isaiah. By the grace of God in Christ, you and I have come. And we bow before the judge, we follow in the footsteps of the early church which was devoted to Christ and to one another. We live by God's word, doing radical things like forgiving someone who attempted to kill us. And, as a result, we get a taste of heaven here on earth. We experience life as it could never have been found apart from Christ. He is the source and the power of our hope.

With Assyria threatening Israel's very existence, the promise of peace under the Messiah gave the people great hope. They could get through the dark days knowing that, in the end, there would be victory and peace. It all focused on Christ. Without him there is no hope. The temple points to him and to the glorious difference there is for those who live in his kingdom. He is our hope when the bank account is low, when the family is under stress, when school is bad, when we're sick, and when we're facing death—our own or that of a loved one. He's our hope when our soul is troubled by guilt or shame. He restores us through forgiveness. He walks with us and gives us direction in this life. We gain a foretaste of a new life that awaits us in eternity and is guaranteed to us through Jesus who came to be our Saviour and invites us to know him as our Lord.

We can endure the struggles of life today because we know that even if things look bad, they aren't hopeless. We put our hand into the hand of Jesus, walk in his way, and let him lead us until we get home. That's what we celebrate in baptism. God reaching to us and our children and offering hope. Saying, "I'm good for my word. I'll be your God and the God of your children, like Theodore and Elliot. His promise is certain because Jesus makes it so. Now there's always hope on the horizon, no matter what we go through. Such hope can give us courage in the midst of trials and challenges. It can make us bold in a world that needs the love of Christ. The promises of God are true and we can be sure that he'll do everything he said he would do for us. God said it. Jesus guaranteed it. You can put all your hope in him.