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Scripture: Leaning Into Christmas-Hope vs. Despair

In Vienna, Austria in the time leading up to World War II there were three Jewish psychiatrists. Two were leading authorities in the field and one, just a young apprentice.

The first, Sigmund Freud, had spent years studying people. Striving to understand what makes humanity tick. He reached the conclusion that the most basic drive in human beings is the pursuit of pleasure. It's our need for pleasure that explains why we do what we do and how we live.

The second was Alfred Adler. He too has spent years studying human behaviour. His research led him to disagree with Freud. Adler was convinced the bottom line explanation for human behaviour was power. His premise was that we grow up feeling inferior and powerless and so life is a relentless drive to gain control, to feel we are important.

The third was a young up-and-coming psychiatrist by the name of Victor Frankl. He had dreams to follow in the footsteps of his two mentors. But before his career gained any momentum, World War II broke out. The Nazis invaded and although Freud and Adler managed to flee, Frankl was not so fortunate. As a Jew, he was arrested and confined to a Nazi Concentration Camp for 4 brutal years. Once the Nazis were defeated and World War Two ended, Frankl was released and he resumed his career. As he reflected on his time as a prisoner, he came to a startling realization. The people that survived the Nazi concentration camp were not the ones you'd expect. Many of those who were physically strong, wasted away and died while others who were much weaker physically, grew strong and survived. Why? What was it that enabled them to hang on through this living hell? Frankl reflected on the theories of his mentors.

Freud's pleasure theory couldn't explain it. Throughout their time in the concentration camp, the prisoners knew only pain and suffering.. And Adler's theory about power being the most basic human need didn't stand up either. Frankl and his fellow prisoners were completely powerless during their entire time in the camps. That is when Victor Frankl came up with his own theory. The difference between those who survived this horrific experience and those who perished, was hope. Those who survived never gave up their belief that their lives had meaning. That despite everything going on around them, their hope was that one day it would end and they would live meaningful, purposeful lives.

What is the basic human drive? The one thing that gives life value? Not pleasure. Not power. But hope. Do you have hope today? That your life has meaning?

Welcome to Christmas Eve at North Park. In our services over the last three weeks we have been focused on Advent. Christmas is the season of Advent. During this time in the Christian calendar, we join with Christians around the globe, to remember the coming of Jesus into the world and we anticipate a time when he will come again.

The four themes of Advent are Love, Joy, Peace and Hope. The question we have been pondering over the last few weeks is, what did Jesus's life and ministry teach us about these four themes and how do we, as followers of Jesus, live out these qualities when the world so often wants to flip them around. Have you noticed that?

Instead of love, our world can be an apathetic place. Instead of Joy, there is sorrow. Instead of peace, there is discord and instead of hope, there is despair.

Advent is a time to celebrate light in the midst of darkness, representing Jesus coming to a darkened world. It is symbolized best by lighting candles in the advent wreath. We have lit the candles for Love, Peace, Joy in the last three weeks. Tonight, we light the candle of Hope.

Light in the midst of darkness. Isn't that a perfect definition of hope?

Hope. What does this word mean to you? When I say hope, what comes to your mind? Just think of your past week. Where you put your time, energy and talent. What does it say about where you put your hope? Or do you even have hope? I met with people, many of you every week. In my office, I sit with married couples who wonder if they still really love one another and they grapple for hope. I visit hospitals and meet with many of you who have been given a difficult health diagnosis and you search for hope. In your homes, I meet with some of you who have lost a loved one and you struggle for hope in the midst of your grief.

As Frankl contends, the search for meaning and hope appears to be a psychological necessity for human beings. We function differently when we see a situation as hopeful versus hopeless. Has that been your experience? Think of the times when you said, this is hopeless. Chances are it was when you didn't see results. There didn't seem to be a better future.

I like to catch bits and pieces of that classic Christmas movies this time of year. Hey, I saw *ELF* for the first time, last week. Not bad. But a personal favourite is, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Have you seen it? Do you remember the scene where the angel Clarence is summoned to help a trouble human. *Is he sick?* Clarence asks. *NO, it's worse than being sick*, the head angel replies, *he's discouraged*.

Discouragement or hopelessness. It's when you feel your situation is never going to improve. Or that there is no escape, that you are trapped forever in your predicament. That can lead you to a dark place, can't it? Severe depression or even worse, suicidal thoughts. And I know that there are some even here today, where that has been your reality.

Here is the thing that is a little confusing for us as we consider the way that we think of this concept of

hope. In our culture today, we tend to use the word hope when we are wishing for something to happen. It is almost an unsure optimism.

I HOPE I get the job.

I HOPE for a good mark on an exam.

I HOPE Austin Matthews recovers from his injury soon!

I HOPE I win the lottery.

Or I HOPE that tomorrow will be a better day.

Our culture's idea of hope is to *wish for*, to expect but without certainty of the fulfillment. To desire very much but with no real assurance of getting what we desire. The world tells us to put our hope in ourselves, in our things or in circumstances and when they inevitably disappoint us, we seemed surprised. And despair can set in. Just think about that. Where do you put your hope? What are you hoping for today? Do you have hope for a better future?

In the Kingdom of God, hope is different. In scripture, hope is not so much a *wish for* as it is an indication of certainty. Hope in the bible means a strong and confident expectation that what God said is going happen, will actually happen.

A familiar verse in the New Testament, ties this idea of Hope to Faith.

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Do you see how it emphasizes hope with certainty? We can live now because of the certainty of our future. What God has promise us in his word is true. You can anchor your life to that. It is the type of hope that gives our lives as followers of Jesus, meaning and purpose. Because of what God has done, specifically by sending his son Jesus to us, and what he continues to do, that means that each day brings new possibilities.

In Lamentations 3:19-23, listen to the despair of the author at the beginning of the text but the hope at the end.

Lamentations 3:19-23

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.*

*²⁰ I will remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.*

*²¹ Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:*

*²² Because of the LORD's great love we are
not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

*²³ They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

Do you believe that? Because of Christmas, Jesus. Light broke through the darkness and each day brings new possibilities. There is a future, there is a new day for you and for me. There is hope! And that doesn't mean that everything is always going to be rosy. That you will never have feelings of doubt or despair but Hope is seeing that because of Jesus, God is with us, Immanuel. We are never alone. Have you experience that peace, that you are never alone? No matter what you go through. One of the great inheritances that we have as children of God is hope. That is why this season of Advent is so important in our Christian tradition.

We remember the longing of our ancestors for a Messiah who would come and save them. Free them from their sin that held them in bondage and God did the unimaginable. He came to earth himself in the form of a baby, during a pretty bleak time in history. A baby, born into a poor family, in an inconspicuous town off the beaten path in a dirty stable and this humble gesture set into motion the redemptive plan for all of humanity. It's Jesus.

Romans 5: 1-5

*Therefore, since we have been made right in
God's sight by faith, we have peace with
God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord
has done for us. ² Because of our faith,
Christ has brought us into this place of
undeserved privilege where we now stand,
and we confidently and joyfully look forward
to sharing God's glory.*

*³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into
problems and trials, for we know that they
help us develop endurance. ⁴ And endurance
develops strength of character, and
character strengthens our confident hope of*

*salvation. ⁵ And this hope will not lead to
disappointment. For we know how dearly
God loves us, because he has given us the
Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

Biblical hope is certain and sure because it is founded on faith in the factual content of the gospel. Because he so loves us, God sent his son, Jesus to earth. He lived and he loved and then took our sins upon himself. When he was put to death and buried, our sins were buried with him. And when Jesus was raised from the dead after three days, it gave us the possibility of new life as well. Hope, when we put our faith in Him. Have you done that? Put your faith in Jesus? If not, where have you put your faith? How is that working out for you? Jesus is the only certain hope we have, in a very uncertain world.

God uses all of our circumstances to foster hope in us, when we turn to Him. Does that encourage you? Think of whatever is weighing you down today, whatever is causing you to be anxious or discouraged. Can you surrender it to God right now and invite Him to turn it to hope? Right now. Our hope because of Jesus is not an escape from our problems or from reality. It doesn't leave us sitting in a room twiddling our thumbs waiting for that one day when Jesus returns. It doesn't have us fearful when someone predicts that the world will end in 2018. Or when North Korea is threatening nuclear War. Or even when Donald Trump is tweeting!

And it doesn't leave us sitting in the safety of a church building surround by people that all think and feel the same way as us. The Hope of Jesus calls us to action. It kicks us into gear. It beckons us to live, truly live on mission for Him. To go out into our world and love those that God puts in lives. In our schools, our workplace and our neighbourhoods. And then do you know what will happen? People will see the hope we have. The certain hope. God will use our lives to point others to Jesus. I want to suggest to you that the hope we have Jesus, it changes the way we see ourselves and our circumstances. It changes our mindset.

Hope comes from seeing that life has meaning and there is a future. If all we had to look forward to was our bodies wasting away, a lot of doctor's appointments when we get older and then one day being buried in a box six feet underground. There is

no future. People would see their lives as hopeless and would live anyway that they choose because, what's the use? Eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die!

But because of Jesus, we don't have to simply survive life, we can prosper and flourish because there is a present and a future. Our lives have meaning and purpose. We have hope. And that hope in us is to be shared with others.

Oh, our world in desperate need of the hope. Would you agree? With tyrannical world leaders, terrorism, wars, famines, people driving cars into crowded streets. We need hope. The Hope of a Savior, Jesus Christ. That is what we remember this advent season. That is what Christmas is all about, God broke through the heavens and came to earth.

Light broke through the darkness and was born a baby in a manger. Born to save us all. Born to give our lives meaning. Maybe Victor Frankl was on to something.

Have you received the miracle of Christmas? Do you have hope through Jesus Christ? That is what this communion table is all about. It is a table of Hope.

Communion.

Lighting of Candles.

Matthew 5:14-15 The Message

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!

Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

Points to Ponder

Leaning into Christmas

Christmas Eve Service

Hope vs. Despair

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever experienced a time when you have lost hope? When you wondered if your life had meaning or if there was a future. Share some of your feelings and experiences.
2. Discuss and contrast the world's definition of hope, *an unsure optimism of the future*, with the biblical definition of hope, *a strong and confident expectation that what God said would happen, will actually happen*. What has been your experience with both of these definitions?
3. Advent is remembering that light broke through the darkness. It remembers God's plan of salvation for humanity by giving his son, Jesus for the sins of the world. At Christmas, we remember light, Jesus breaking through the darkness and hopelessness of our world. Share with your group the ways that Jesus has brought your life hope and meaning.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Take some time to express your gratitude to God for the gift of his son, Jesus. Thank him for the hope and meaning that he has given to your life.