

I've been seeing a lot of articles lately that are proclaiming the ruin of Christmas this year. Our supply chain woes and soaring prices means we may not have as much to put under the tree. Most of the articles conclude that Christmas just won't be very good this year. But is that true? Is Christmas 2021 just another casualty in the calamity of the last 24 months? Or, in the words of that great theologian The Grinch, "What if Christmas doesn't come from a store? What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more?"

The truth is that Christmas is a reminder of the gifts that can't be devalued because of inflation, we can't miss out on because of low inventory levels, and we can't be separated from because of social distancing or quarantine. In fact, the tumult of the last two years is a reminder of how much we need these gifts, and this holiday season is an opportunity to center our hearts on the one who gives them to us. They are ours because of the greatest gift ever given: Jesus.

This morning we begin our Advent series, and in an effort to be really creative, we're calling it...Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming". In the 4th and 5th centuries, new believers in Jesus would spend 40 days fasting and praying as a preparation for baptism. Over time, the focus shifted to Jesus' 2nd coming, his second Advent, but since the Middle Ages, Christians all over the world have spent this time celebrating his first coming, Christmas. There are lots of different traditions that go with this from Bible passages to common themes to candle lighting to structured prayers. We will focus on Old Testament promises fulfilled in Jesus that make things like hope, joy, and peace possible and call us to prepare our hearts for his arrival. We will also light candles every week as we look forward to gathering on December 24th to celebrate the birth of our Savior. My prayer is that you would make room for God to work in your heart over the next few weeks. Christmas is not ruined. It is vital to our lives and faith as we persevere through these trying times.

We begin this morning with hope. It can be a confused word. We often use it as an eager desire for something to possibly happen in the future. "I hope I get ___ for Christmas." "I hope we have enough whipped cream for dessert." "I hope the Cowboys don't blow another strong start to the season." But for the believer, hope is something more. **Hope is the confident expectation of a promised favorable future.** It is the anticipation of better days made possible by God's grace. But hope is only as good as the faithfulness and power of the one who promises.

When my boys were younger they would often ask me for large sums of money. "Dad, will you give me \$1million when I grow up." I could have answered "yes", and it would have left my boys hopeful, but it would have been a false hope. I don't have the capacity to give them a million dollars and, frankly, I don't really have the desire! **Our hope is true and good only if God is able and willing to do what he said he's going to do.** If he is, it should change our life. If he's not, let's just eat, drink, and be merry, because this is as good as it's going to get. If you're wondering if we have anything to hope for, Christmas has the answer to that question.

[Isaiah 9:1-7a] But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ³You have multiplied the nation; you have increased

its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. ⁴For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

750 years before Jesus was born the Prophet Isaiah began to speak words of judgement against Israel in what would be a catastrophic time in their nation's history. Because of their disobedience, God judged them by sending first the Assyrian army, who conquered the northern kingdom, and eventually the Babylonian army, who conquered the southern kingdom. Zebulun and Naphtali were northern tribes and the gateway for any army who invaded Israel, so they always got it first. Isaiah uses the words gloom, anguish, and contempt to describe their situation. To put it into one word, they were "hopeless".

Would you say we live in gloomy times? We live in a world broken by sin. That includes our own, which we can't pay for. We need a savior. And we have just gone through two of the hardest years I can remember. The list is getting old: pandemic, social and racial unrest, tumultuous political times, isolation. As days go by, our hope is eroded. Is God in this? Does he even care? Can he do anything about it? How long do I have to wait? What's even the point of praying or reading the Bible? We are in an endurance race and there doesn't seem to be an end.

But what does Isaiah say will happen. The former time, the conditions they are currently living under, will be replaced by the latter times. I love that Scripture doesn't try to minimize our reality. Isaiah doesn't mince words about current conditions. I can struggle with that. My optimism can sometimes morph into a lack of acknowledgement of what's really going on. But hope gives us the freedom to say what's real. **We can define today for exactly what it is because we know it won't always be that way.** It was bad in Isaiah's day, and we are in tough times now. But in the midst of darkness, we have a promise of light, times of sadness will make way for times of joy, defeat will turn to victory. Notice the grammar. Isaiah uses what's known as the "prophetic perfect" of verbs. The perfect tense means a completed action. He's speaking as if these things are already done. It is the grammar of the hopeful. Do you speak this way?

This hope will be fulfilled through a child to be born, given to Israel, and to us. Isaiah has already said in Ch 7 this child will be born to a virgin and his name shall be Immanuel, which means God with us. He will rule, but his Kingdom won't be like any other. He will reverse the gloom and anguish. Everyone will be treated right and made right. He will pour out wisdom as he teaches God's ways. He will love and accept us like a father, and make a way for peace, setting things just the way they should be, between man and man and man and God, and his Kingdom will have no end. **If hope looks forward to a promised favorable future, this is it.**

But how will this happen? The answer is found at the end of the section: **[Isaiah 9:7b] The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.** God is promising to make this happen, and that is the point

where all hope resides. Will God keep his promise? Any of us can make promises all day long, but if we don't have the ability or desire to fulfill them, they are worthless. Some friends had some work done on their house. Two different guys made promises to complete work by a certain date. One guy followed through time after time, and as he did, their hope in him grew. The other guy, though, wouldn't show, was always delayed, couldn't fulfill what he promised. As time went on, they lost hope in him.

Should we hope in God? If God can't deliver, or won't, our hope is empty, and where there is no hope, there is no joy, and where there is no hope, there is no peace. But if he does, we can hope, regardless of our circumstances. And that's the good news of Christmas because he already has delivered.

2,000 years ago, good news of great joy was announced by an angel to shepherds in a field. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The child promised in Isaiah 9 had arrived. And in Matthew's Gospel, written to Jews to show time and again the Messiah they have been hoping for, that God has promised, is fulfilled in Jesus, we're told this.

[Matthew 4:13-16] ¹³ And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵ "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles ¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."

God delivered on his promise. Jesus is the great light. He is the one who will sit on the throne of David and usher in a Kingdom of peace. Jesus is the substance of our hope because he is our Savior. He is also the vindication of it. **Jesus answers the question "How can we be sure God can and will keep his promises?"** You and I do not worship and hope in a God who has never delivered on what he said he would. We live on the other side of the most pivotal moment in history. That means Christmas is more than a sentimental holiday. It is a yearly reminder of the power and faithfulness of God, and what he has done in the past gives us confidence he'll continue to do in the future. Because God has shown up, we can trust he'll keep showing up.

What does that mean for us? **[Hebrews 10:23] ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.** We can live a life of hope because God always makes good. His faithfulness in Jesus' first advent gives us hope for what he will do in his second. So what does it look like to live with this hope?

Hope says God's Word can be trusted. All of it. 750 years before Jesus, God made a promise. It is the greatest one he has ever fulfilled, but it's one of many. There are a few more he has yet to fulfill. **That means your current circumstances don't define your reality.** These present times won't last. There is coming a day where you will walk not by faith but by sight, where you will be restored to perfect, glorified, physical bodies, that you'll be at the banquet table with your Savior as part of the family of God, and all tears, death, mourning, and crying will be wiped away. And, until then, you live in the realized hope that you are a sinner saved by grace, a new creation, a child of God fully loved and fully accepted, and a member of God's family. All that is found in God's Word.

Where in your life do you need to be reminded that God is faithful and have your hope restored? Hopeful people aren't blissfully ignorant. They know intimately the God who makes and keeps his promises. That can be you.

Hope says God's timing is perfect. So when is he going to move? We can grow impatient, especially in this instant gratification world. Waiting is tough. Patience is challenged. Don't believe me? Many of you will get mad in the next few weeks because Amazon will say two days, but it will take three. **Hope lets us wait faithfully.**

[Isaiah 8:16-17, Galatians 4:4-5] ¹⁶ Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples. ¹⁷ I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him...⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Isaiah knew what he was saying wasn't going to happen instantly. He trusted God and his hope didn't waver because he had to wait for its fulfillment. At just the right time, God did move, and fulfilled his promise. He knows the right time for when to move again. **When we see Jesus came at the perfect time, we can trust his return will be perfectly-timed as well.** And as we trust and hope in God in the biggest things, we can hope in his perfect timing in the small things. What do you need to wait on God for? Relationship, healing, restoration, work, etc.? Your hope is not in vain. He's always right on time.

Hope says God's will is the way. I want what God says is going to happen in the future. **And if I can trust him with my eternity, I can trust him with my present.** Hope sets us free. We don't have to hold on to anything. You don't have to try to get yours in this life because what's in store for you in the next is infinitely better. So give it all to the one who was given to us. His counsel is perfect, his grace is sufficient, his ways are perfect. You know the end of the story. Let God write whatever he wants on the pages leading up to it. Whatever he comes up with is better than anything you can.

I want to close with an old Celtic Advent prayer and then we will sing about the hope we have in Christ, and one of our families will come light the advent candle of hope.

We have waited long for You.

Deep has been the darkness.

We long for You to shine right here among us where we are.

We will not fear the shadows that surround us if only You will come among us!

We await the sound of a cry in the night, the joy that follows pain, the coming of hope.