

Sermon - November 29, 2009

The Power of Hope

Psalm 25:1-10, Luke 21:25-38

It's the classic pre-Christmas question. Parents find ways to ask their children. Spouses find ways to get their spouses to tell them. Grand parents ask for help in knowing the answers. What do you want for Christmas? And a whole advertizing industry is devoted to giving us all answers to the question.

I suspect not a few of you we're part of the Black Friday experiences. I escaped this year – in part by design. Escaped the advertizing fueled shopping extravaganza – the get what you want to get for Christmas now – at the best price possible – and all you needed to do was be at Kohl's by 4 a.m. Anybody want to fess up to the madness?

And – Oh yes - forget that old carol line about Christmas Eve - the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

No – we've moved things up a bit - hopes and dreams - early in the morning on Black Friday. We've shelved anticipation, the waiting to see what Santa will bring.

We go get it all now – excuse me – then on the after Thanksgiving Day sale. We get just what we want for Christmas.

Or was Christmas, and should Christmas still, be about something radically different than that? Something more than wanting two teeth, or sleigh rides, or stuffed stockings, or roasting chestnuts. Should the lists we've made be revised and the hopes we have for Christmas 2009 reviewed?

Should we look around us at the state of the world, and should we listen, really listen to Jesus' words about praying for strength to resist the temptations all around us, and to find the courage to stand in the Christ's presence, and maybe restate our wants and needs and hopes for Christmas?

What do we want for Christmas? And maybe it will take us 4 weeks to think about this, in order to be ready for what God knows we really need. Let us pray.

Thank you Lord, for the gift of hope. Guide us, Lord, by your word and spirit, that what we hope for most of all is to have what you alone know is best for us. Help us

Lord to put on our Christmas list one thing above all - to know your will for us. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, help us know your will for us is in Christ Jesus. Amen.

It will be hard, maybe very hard, and maybe almost impossibly hard to do it. But it is or should be, shouldn't it be, a goal for each one of us. To somehow resist all the worldly noise and clamor, all the almost crushing commercialization of our current Christmas culture.

It will be hard to somehow get ourselves, our lives, more in tune with the first Christmas than with the frantic financial thing Christmas has become. The carol sings a fundamental truth we all know about, but struggle to experience.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts, the wonder of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this weary world of sin, where meek quiet souls will receive him, still, the dear Christ enters in.

If there is a light of hope at Christmas, if there is something in this season to lift our spirits, to move us past our troubles, of the economy, of two mid-east wars - if there is something to encourage us in our faith and in our love for God and for each other, if there is hope for us – it needs to be a hope that finds its home in our hearts and not in our hands.

Lights twinkling in the dark will brighten and cheer our neighborhoods this Advent time of year. And the message of the carols, even if no one really listens to the words anymore, will still lift spirits for some.

But hope, the hope we hunger for in our troubled, burdened, bummed out time in our state and nation, and world... hope for those for whom this season and even the carols, are reminders of loss and not gain, of pain and not joy... This hope is for something way more vital to us than most Christmas lists contain.

This hope, the hope of Advent, the hope for God's presence in our midst, this hope will speak to our hearts, will stir our spirits, will turn us inside out, from doubters to believers, from sad souls to people of promise and even to cheer leaders and change agents for a new day, for a new way of life that truly seeks the best for every person, that leaves no child, nor anyone else, behind, but seeks for all to win at the game of life.

It will be hard, maybe very hard, for us to slow down, to ease the rush and race of our pace, to be more still, and so experience the true wonder and joy and peace and power that Christmas and its gift of Christ really and truly offers.

But let's begin on this Advent Sunday, this first day of our Christian new year. Let's begin our search for this deeper hope, grounded in Christ's promises to us. This hope that can fill our hearts and change the way we celebrate Christmas, focusing anew on welcoming again the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, God's son and our savior.

For isn't he the ground of all our hopes?

Hope... all kinds of hope. Hope is what keeps sending Charlie Brown, from the comic strip Peanuts – out each year in search of the perfect Christmas tree – and the scraggly thing he finds never quite fulfills his hope - or ours or ours?

Hope – all kinds of hope – the kind of hope us guys have at this time of year, that that box that looks like a tie box under the tree – won't be.

The kind of hope that hopes for a white Christmas right up to a green Christmas day.

Or maybe all of these kinds of things should not be called hope at all – but more truly - longings, and desires, and wishes and wants. All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth....

Maybe we can think this morning about Christian hope as something far deeper and stronger, more a life changing power, than our wishes or wants or longings or desires. Maybe our candle of Hope is really about deep, heart felt human need and heavenly promise?

Hope that can guide us safely through the maze of our material world... Hope like that shared in an Ethiopian legend about a shepherd boy caught in a sudden snow storm in late summer in the desert. After a long night of anxious waiting by his family, he arrived safe. Asked how he survived the sudden bitter cold – he said he saw in the dark the light of a far off fire – and he walked toward it and hoped it would warm him. Hope kept him faced toward the future.

Or the hope of the Rev. in down town Detroit, a tent maker ministry, who put his mind to work on housing and feeding the homeless using the decaying old Trumbel Ave. Presbyterian Church, once the home for one of the largest congregation in the nation.

The Rev. has worked to house the homeless and feed the hungry even using tents inside to ward off chill from rain and snow. On hope alone – until his story caught the eye of Mitch Albom who saw the great good being done... and now there is no hole in the roof, and there is resource for serving more and more people.

Hope! Hope! We thank God for our hope.

Watchman tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are. Aught of Joy or Hope foretell? Traveler yes it brings the day, Promised day of Israel. Promised day of Israel.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, God with us. Come, thou Long expected Jesus. Born to set thy people free. From our fear and sins release us; let us find our rest in Thee.

Such is the real hope of Advent – the highest of hopes - and – I think – I believe, if we dig deep enough into our lives, or the life of almost any person, that's the hope that we all will really hunger for. Hope that – yes, hope that we might be set free of our fears and sins.

Which one of us doesn't struggle with fears and sins. The fear of not being loved, of not counting, of death and the end of this life, the only life we know.

And the sins we've committed, and fear we will again – bad habits, addictions, selfish and dishonest things we've said and done.

And that's what Christian Christmas hope is about. It's about God's gift of hope that let's us see life not in light of the struggles of the past, but in light of the promises of God for a different future.

Yes, we all have longings, wishes, whims and desires, wants, unfulfilled wants, for all the things the world offers.

But here is the claim of our faith. Finally, finally, all our worldly desires and wants and longings will never be met, no matter how we strive to meet or satisfy them....

None of our wants will be supplied - Until - Until the deepest and greatest need we all have is met - the need to know that no matter what, no matter what, we are loved.

And this is the truth of Christmas and the ground of our Christmas hope - built on nothing less than Jesus and his righteousness. The truth is, the truth is, that all desires in our human worldly lives can fail, will fail, save one.

The desire to be loved by God. It is the promise of this Sunday - this Advent time in the Christian year. This is the first Sunday of a new Christian year... And it begins in a spirit of hope. The old is passed away, behold the new has come.

And - Every year we begin again – and hear again Jesus words - calling us to let go of the things we hold too fast to in this world. He says... be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipations and the worries of this life.

Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these Things And to stand before the Son of Man.

I suspect the best organized of us have been making their lists of what people want for Christmas. And the rest of us think we have it all pretty much in mind. If you are a list maker, and even if you're not, I would suggest to you, encourage you to put a new no. 1 item on your Christmas wish and want list.

Come Lord Jesus, Come. Come this Christmas anew into my heart, my soul, my life. Capture me anew with the wonder of your birth, with the power of your life and teaching, with the miracle of your death and resurrection, and with the hope, the hope, Lord, the hope we can have because of Christmas and Easter - that nothing, nothing in this world, can separate us from your love for us Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. That you so loved the world that you gave your only son – for us.

What do we want for Christmas? May we discover anew this year the wonder and the power of the hope that is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ... A hope that has stood the test of time for 2000 years.

A hope that continues to call people out of a culture of consumption into lives of compassion and care and Christ-like sharing and service. That has touched this Church and its people for 135 years – moving hearts and hands in mission

Sharing... A hope that like the shepherd's hope - sees the light of the fire across the cold dessert of our human disappointments, and is warmed by the fire he can only see ahead.

May we see ahead again this Advent season. See ahead to the renewing of God's promise to us in Christ... And so live into hope.

Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor

Note: This is Pastor Robertson's last sermon at Orchard Lake Community Church, Presbyterian, as its Pastor.