

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

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1st Sunday of Advent

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ADVENT SERIES: 1. THE GIFT OF HOPE

Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-6 I Peter 1:3-9 Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

In my childhood home, once we decorated a freshly cut pine tree with lights and ornaments and tinsel, it wasn't long before brightly wrapped gifts of all sizes would begin appearing under the Christmas tree. As a child it was a wonder to behold. Whether or not you have or will soon have a Christmas tree in your home, I would like you to imagine that this year there are four extra special gifts under the tree. The gift tag on each box says... "To: My disciples From: Jesus"

There's a package on the Communion Table that represents the first gift. Notice that the wrapping paper looks exactly like our bulletin cover, so today we are unwrapping and contemplating the gift of hope that is ours in the One whose birth we will soon celebrate again, the One who will come again with power and great glory. With all that is happening in our personal lives and in our world, from economic anxiety to ongoing war, from rising unemployment to growing hunger, from health issues to the contentious health care reform debate, our personal reserves of hope may be running low; so this may be the gift we most need to open during this Advent season. So let's imagine opening the gift in our hearts. What might we discover? Let me suggest at least three things.

The first thing we might discover is the Holy Bible. In the vocabulary of scripture hope can be defined as confident expectation, the anticipation of something good in the future. You've heard some say, "Don't get your hopes up," but that is precisely what hope is for; hope keeps us turned toward the future. And that's how hope is depicted in the Biblical story – ever looking forward, new life always ahead.

God fashioned the whole of creation out of nothing and its beauty and magnificence is still being revealed millions of years later. After 40 days of rain a dove with an olive branch lighted on the railing of the ark assuring Noah and his family that land was in sight and a new life could begin. In the face of what seemed impossible Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a child in their old age and thus the promise that their descendents would number in the stars was and is being fulfilled. Moses delivers God's people from slavery and death to life and freedom, to a new future in a promised land. During ominous and fearful times the prophets spoke often of the coming of a Messiah and thus a blessed future.

Yes, the Biblical story is a story of hope, of ever looking forward. It assures us that the future is open and full of possibility. As William Sloane Coffin, an acclaimed Protestant preacher, once said, “Hope arouses in us nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.” What this says to me is that the gift of hope is strong and irrepressible. Kick hope around, knock it down, stomp on it, and hope being hope still gets up, stands again, and keeps looking and moving forward. That’s the testimony of our Biblical ancestors.

The next thing we may notice as we imagine opening the gift of hope is that the box looks empty, but really it isn’t. As a Czechoslovakian playwright (Vaclav Havel) once wrote, Hope is “a dimension of the Spirit. It is not outside us but within us.” So what might we do to nurture the spirit of hope that resides in us. Let me offer some suggestions.

1. When you are facing a difficult time meditate on one of the many assurances from scripture that give rise to hope. For me it would be a favorite verse from Romans, “All things work together for good for those who love God.” (Say it with me.)
2. The root meaning of the word hope in the Hebrew means “refuge”. When you are finding it especially hard to pray in difficult times and your reservoir of hope is low, try a breath prayer. Breathe in and say, “My hope” and breathe out and say, “is in God”. (Let’s practice). This breathe prayer is a way to place ourselves in the shelter of God’s embrace and be renewed in hope.
3. Plant a tree. I hope that opportunity will come as we further develop the perimeter of our community garden. Many people plant trees in whose shade they will never sit during their lifetimes. It’s an act that reflects hope in the future.
4. Bring to heart and mind those in your life who have mentored you in the way of hope (like Don Grant) and be inspired by their faith, their courage. Or remember a time when hope pulled you through and know that you can do it again.
5. When we need a boost of hope there’s nothing quite like music to lift our spirits. So rock out with a song that helps you to keep looking and moving forward. One of my favorite anthems of hope is the song “I Can See Clearly Now”. Listen as it is sung by Anne Murray.

I can see clearly now the rain is gone

I can see all obstacles in my way
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind
It's goin to be a bright, bright, sun shiny day...

I think I can make it now, the pain is gone
All the bad feelings have disappeared
Here is the rainbow I've been prayin' for
It's goin to be a bright, bright sun-shiny day...

Look all around, there's nothing but blue skies
Look straight ahead, there's nothing but blue skies

Now the most important thing we may notice as we imagine opening this gift of Hope is the bright, bright light that radiates from it. Consider an Ethiopian legend about a shepherd boy named Alemayu. One night he was stranded on an icy mountain, clothed in the thinnest of wraps. When he got safely back to the village, they asked him how he had survived under such life-threatening circumstances. He explained that the sky was dark, the night biting cold, and he thought he would die, but then he saw a shepherd's campfire far off on another mountain. He kept his eyes on the red glow of the fire and hoped of being warm. Consider also the story of a young Christian man in one of Aleksandr Solzenitsyn's books (*One Day in the Life of Evan Denisovich*). His name is Alyoska. He is a prisoner who endures the same sentence and awful drudgery as the other prisoners, but Alyoska stands apart because he "reads his Gospels facing the light bulb."

Notice the similarities in the stories of Alemayu and Alyoska. One kept his eyes on the fire, the other faced the light bulb. The hope we know as Christians is not wishful thinking, like I hope it doesn't rain this weekend or I hope the economy gets better soon. Christian hope is about keeping our eyes and hearts on the Light that has come into the world in the Gift of Gifts, God's Beloved Son, Jesus.

In his first letter to Christians who were living in the land we now call Turkey, who were suffering hostility and persecution, who were beginning to lose their faith and their hope, Peter encourages them to keep their eyes and hearts on Jesus. He writes, With great mercy God "has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The basis of our Christian hope is the good news of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In a world of violence and warfare, poverty and suffering, disease and death none of these things has the last word because of our hope in Christ. This hope feeds our souls. It's the tonic that keeps us moving forward no matter our circumstances. As someone once wrote: "Hope is hearing the melody of the future" (Ruben A. Alvez).

So as we look toward celebrating again Jesus' birth on Christmas and look toward Jesus' coming again, we wouldn't be celebrating at all if it weren't for Easter. So as you imagine opening and claiming again the gift of hope on your way to Bethlehem this Advent season notice that there is a cross in the cradle and it is surrounded with glorious light. We have hope because of what God did on that bright Easter morning. God destroyed the powers of darkness and raised Jesus from the dead. Our Easter proclamation is that life is stronger than death, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness. There in lies our hope.

Friends, the gift of hope is ours in Christ Jesus, the child of Bethlehem and our Risen Lord. If you are grieving a loss this holy season open the gift of hope. If you are struggling with health concerns, living with cancer or debilitating pain, unwrap the gift of hope. If the economy has hit you particularly hard and you are feeling insecure, open the gift of hope. If you have more years behind you than in front of you and know the many losses that come with aging, unwrap the gift of hope. If you are experiencing the pain of heartache, the anguish of the unknown, the uncertainty of tomorrow, receive again the gift of hope that is yours in the Gift of Gifts, God's Beloved Son and our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Friends, Advent means coming. Our long-expected Jesus is coming. His gift of hope awaits us. Let's unwrap this precious gift and be filled with all the hope we need to live in his light and to be his light.

Let us pray:

“Gracious God, our Help and our Refuge, on this first Sunday of Advent, we thank you for the gift of hope. It is a strong reservoir from which we draw. Help us to embrace fully the hope we have in you. As we journey again to Bethlehem and kneel again at the manger of the Christ Child help us to embrace fully the hope we have in him. Then give us the passion to share it with the world, ever giving witness to your love. In the name of Jesus, the Gift of Gifts and our Risen Lord, we pray. Amen.”