

Hope: The Days are surely coming. Jer 33:14-16, Colossians 1:26-28

Adapted from a sermon by Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson, and "Does Advent even matter," by Sarah Bessey

It is that time of year again. Christmas music came on the radios with the first of November. Christmas trees and Christmas lights began popping up everywhere right after Halloween. While most of our neighbors can hardly wait for the Christmas holidays to arrive, we Christians try take a step back and start out this season of the church year with a time we call **Advent**. The word Advent comes from the Latin language and means "the coming" or "the arrival." Thus for Christians, Advent marks a season of expectant waiting and preparation until the appropriate time for the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus, the one who long ago was promised to come.



So we decorate the Church with greenery representing the evergreen qualities of hope, love, joy, and peace as we await the coming promised messiah. The liturgical color is purple, signifying for us a season of quiet introspection as we prepare to greet our royal Lord. And the Advent Candles serve as a calendar of sorts, marking a journey of four weeks bringing us ever closer to the miracle in Bethlehem, to the day when God fulfilled His promise with the birth of that baby whom the prophet Jeremiah had named, "God our Righteousness"

This Sunday, our first candle is the candle of **hope**. And with the lighting of the this candle, we thus begin our journey towards Christmas in hope ... venturing forward with, those prophets of old who foresaw and anxiously awaited the coming of the messiah, the anointed one, God's son, our savior, who on that Christmas long ago came first as our suffering servant to seek out and save us. But who has also promised one day to come again as Jeremiahs' prophesied conquering king *to execute justice and righteousness in the land*.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves... I have to ask , **do you have this Advent Hope living within you this year?** Hope is a term so easily be thrown around. "I hope we have clear weather tomorrow." "the children hope we have a white Christmas." "I hope the Bears win." "You hope the Redskins win." But that is not the kind of hope represented by this lone candle burning today.

The hope represented by this candle, is a much greater and much grander hope. It represents the hope of an entire nation, it represents the hope of the entire world. It represents something that you and I often take for granted.

We hear the Christmas story told every single year, so we know when and where that promised child was born and that his given name was Jesus, because he would save us from our sins. But have we ever thought of what the world was before Christmas; what it was like before the promised messiah came?



Imagine yourselves in the shoes, or in this case... the sandals, of the prophet Jeremiah watching as his people were dragged into exile with only the prophetic promise that one day they would return to live in peace.

Jeremiah was called by God at a very early age to be a prophet in Judah. And he is known as the "weeping prophet" because his task was to point out that it was the un-repentant sins of his nation which were now sending them off to exile in Babylon. Sitting on a hillside watching his family, friends, his entire nation marching away in chains to a land far from home... yes Jeremiah had much to weep over.

Yet in the middle of this time of judgment and exile, Jeremiah also offered the people of Judah and Jerusalem a message of hope, beginning with the words: "*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*"

Yes, ironically, this message of hope seemed very much out of sync with everything that was going on around them. In fact at the time of the penning of this message, Jeremiah was sitting in jail, because he had dared to prophesy against king Zedekiah and the people of Judah charging them with being unfaithful to the LORD and His covenant with them.

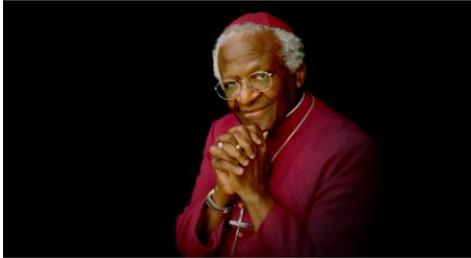
Moreover, to add insult to injury, Jeremiah had said that the present siege of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army was God's instrument of punishment upon the people of Jerusalem and Judah, thus it was pointless to resist them. Such a prophetic message was not well received, no wonder Jeremiah was in jail.

In contemporary times, what Jeremiah had said might be compared with a North American Christian leader now prophesying that Isis and Al Qaida were soon going to invade us and that it would be pointless to resist them, for they are God's instrument of wrath upon us. Such a leader might also very well be thrown into jail and most North Americans would likely reject and condemn their message.

"The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the House of Judah." (Jer. 31:31)

And yet, Jeremiah remains faithful to God from his prison cell having rightfully declared God's judgment on Judah, now in the immediate situation of hopelessness penning this oracle of hope. *The days are surely coming*, Jeremiah writes, when the Messiah-King will come to rule the earth with justice; his very name would identify him as "God our righteousness."

In difficult times it is difficult for people to live with hope. And yet, where there's life there's hope; and where there's hope there's life.



Several years ago, Desmond Tutu, bishop of South Africa wrote a book called Hope And Suffering. It was a very fitting title, and true to life in his country at the time. While people were still being oppressed by the apartheid regime; Bishop Tutu and other Christian leaders dared to proclaim oracles of hope. They said life in South Africa would change, the days

are surely coming; don't lose hope; don't give up on life.

Bishop Tutu himself lived that message of hope and inspired hundreds of thousands of his native country to do the same. And, lo and behold, that hope, in the midst of suffering, gave birth to new life. The apartheid regime did come to an end, and a multicultural, multiracial nation was born, united to live and work for peace, justice, forgiveness, and love for all South Africans.



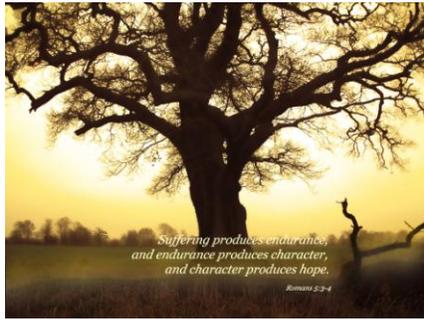
In our world today, there are legions of reasons to kill any hope of ever seeing justice and righteousness throughout our lands. All around the globe there is so much suffering, evil, and injustice.

- We see the aching poverty in places like Jamaica and Venezuela largely brought on by governmental corruption and ineptitude.
- We see the loss of innocent lives in the pandemic drug violence spreading throughout Mexico and many Central American countries.
- We see the oppression of minorities in North Korea, China, and Myanmar.
- We witness the loss of both lives and homes in the religious violence of the Middle East, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan.
- And in our own country almost nightly we hear reports of another random act of senseless violence carried out against innocent strangers, claiming another six, ten, or two dozen lives, all due to some individual's rabid hatred and personal death wish.

And we wonder, is there any hope for our world? Is hope real or only an idealistic dream?

Yes hope is real, because God is real, and hope in God helps us to see beyond our daily struggles, daily defeats, to a better day, not based on our current abilities but upon the promises of God that there is coming a day when He will personally bring justice and righteousness to our sin sick lands. This Hope – in God's kept promises – lifts us above today to rejoice in God's tomorrow.

Researchers have identified at least four processes at work in the lives of those people who display this attitude of hopefulness.



Hope is first grounded in personal experience.

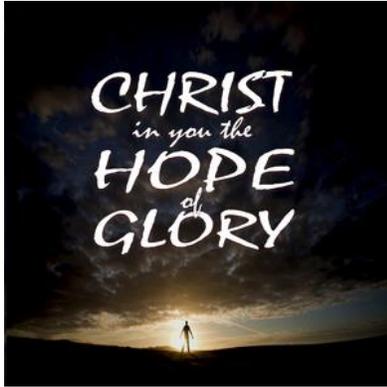
Strange as this may sound, hope seems to grow best in the context of suffering, illness, and death. Suffering is the greatest challenge to hope, and yet it is also true as St. Paul says, that "**suffering produces...hope**" (Rom 5:4-5). Because we can't grow any hope without first experiencing grief. Hope dares to admit that not everything is as it should be. So before we can be hopeful we must first admit that something is broken.

And then only after we acknowledge the brokenness will we begin to look and hope for a path that leads back to wholeness. It makes sense that the medical benefits of hope have long been studied especially in relation to delaying or even defeating such diseases as cancer. Advent matters, because in the midst of so much brokenness it's our way of keeping our eyes and our hearts and our arms all wide open in hope.

Second, Hope is a spiritual experience. Many people use spiritual resources such as prayer, meditation, and guided imagery in their healing process; people who can visualize themselves living, acting, feeling better, generally do so. But Christian hope is so much more than just "hope for" a specific outcome. The hope of the prophets and the hope of today's believers is first a "hope in God," **who has promised to always bring something good out of whatever are our current circumstances** (Romans 8:28). When finite hopes are dashed, "hope in God" emerges like a Phoenix from the ashes. That is the meaning of **resurrection hope** in Christian theology. Even though none of us will survive this life, with God's promises we can be more than victors; as it was with Jesus the messiah, so we also will live again.

Hope is also a rational experience. A central dimension of hope is the provision of some sense of control. Even if patients can't control their illness, they can control their response to it. In the midst of his personal desolation and illness, Job still could pin his hope on God's provision for his life. Job said, **Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face** (Job 13:15).

Fourthly, Hope is a relational experience. Family, friends, and caregivers and God Himself can all contribute to the maintenance of our hope. As Paul would remind us ... **hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us** (Romans 5:5). And as today's second scripture assures us, what the prophets of long ago so desired to see is not only that our messiah would come to earth but that he would come to live in us as well.



the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

Colossians 1:26-27

We live in hope because Christ now lives in us. Thus, living in relation both with God and with one another through the bonds of the Holy Spirit, in this way our hope is experiential, spiritual, rational, relational, and can be contagiously healthy.

Hope is real; it's perhaps most real in the midst of suffering and hopelessness. Whether it's the people of Judah and Jerusalem under siege by the Babylonians; whether it's the troubled spots in the world today; whether it's the poor, homeless, unemployed, or underemployed here in America.

the days have already come once when our Savior, the Messiah-King was first born; grew up and lived among us; taught and preached among us; worked miracles among us; faced cruel suffering and met a criminal's death at the hands of the corrupt and powerful; but he was raised from death three days later with the promise to live with us and through us until the end of time;

but the day is yet to come when he will draw all people to himself to complete all of history, inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth and the new holy city, Jerusalem. From where he will reign as king of Kings and Lord of lords as his name so long ago proclaimed him to be God our righteousness.

So today, let us rejoin with Jeremiah and the other prophets of long ago; still living in hope – but in an assured hope – *for that coming day when according to God's promises righteousness will feel at home* (1 Peter 3:13).

The days are surely coming, says Jeremiah, and as we begin a new Church Year, with this first Sunday of Advent, we look forward with assured hope during these days of waiting, watching, and preparing for our Messiah-King; for the new beginning he offers all who come to him in faith, for new life he gives us through his indwelling Holy Spirit; and some day still to come, just as He promised, when justice and love; peace and joy will be a truth for all peoples.

Our world still needs a Savior, more than ever, Jesus the Messiah-King. Don't give up, for the days are surely coming. Amen.
