

A Thrill of Hope

Introduction

A Different Kind of Christmas

- A. You don't need me to tell you that Christmas feels a bit different this year.
 - 1. I imagine for some of you that's painfully obvious. Because you had plans to be with family or friends and it didn't work out.
 - a. I know my own parents were thinking they were going to fly to Alaska to be with my sister her family there for the holiday. But they had to get a routine COVID test just so they could travel and my mom's comes back positive. She's currently asymptomatic, but positive. So now, what was going to be Christmas with family and little kids and things all around, is Christmas in quarantine.
 - i. And this is just a little example of the sorts of challenges and changes we've all been facing for almost an entire year now—not just because of COVID, but because all of the political, racial, natural, economic unrest.
- B. One of the effects in all of this is the loss of hope. You just get tired—tired of the hurdles; tired of the tensions; tired of the letdowns. Weary . . . to the bones.
 - 1. And the statistics are bearing this out. Weekly surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in an effort to get some sense of how the pandemic is affecting mental health of Americans have, for months now, shown a steady increase in the percentage of Americans who are showing symptoms typically associated with anxiety or depressive disorders. Where it was about 30% in April it's now closer to 40%.
 - a. But the real staggering insight here comes when we compare this data to that gathered from a similar survey conducted in early 2019. There they found that only about 11% of Americans were showing these sorts of symptoms.
 - i. That's an almost 30% increase of people saying, in not so many words: "I'm losing hope." And, in all likelihood, that may be where you're at as well. And you know I've felt it too.

Hope for the Hopeless

- A. This is why I wanted to stop and just consider how Christmas and the advent of Jesus there in Bethlehem relates to hope and ministers profoundly to hopeless people.
 - 1. So three things we're going to look at regarding hope in particular here: (1) The Nature of It; (2) The Search for It; and (3) The Arrival of It.

- B. Each of these headings will be followed by what we call a “Pause Point”—where we invite you to pause the video and consider a reflection question or two that we’ll put up on the screen for you.
 - 1. If you’re watching this with others, you can use it for group discussion.
 - 2. If you’re watching this on your own, you may stop and pray or journal on the matter.
- C. Our hope is that you let this moment breathe a little bit. Christmas can be a busy and stressful time of year, things get a bit stuffy. And we just want you to open the windows of your soul a bit and make space to think and consider what all this about.
 - 1. Whether you’re a Christian or a skeptic, whether you’re old or young, our prayer is that there will be something here for you—something that makes you think, something that touches your heart, something that gives you hope.
 - a. So grab a mug of something warm, maybe a Christmas cookie or two, and let’s go!

(1) The Nature of It

Expectation of Tomorrow

- A. The first thing we must consider very briefly here is the nature of hope, and by this I mean: what exactly is it?
- B. I suppose, if I had to define it up front for us, I would say that hope is the expectation of a coming future that will be in some way better than the present.
 - 1. It is that yearning glance towards the distant horizon in anticipation of some good thing that lay just beyond it.
 - a. In this sense it is the seeing of something not with the physical eyes but with the eyes of the heart. It is currently not here in front of you, but you are all but certain it will be here soon.
- C. This notion of hope I think is best brought out by the words of the apostle Paul in [Romans 8:24-23](#) when he writes: “[H]ope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”
 - 1. It is expectant waiting. It is currently unseen and yet nonetheless greatly anticipated. It is the sense that tomorrow can and will be even better than today.
- D. This is why Emily Dickinson, the famous American poet, writes: “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all.” Hope, in other words, is like a songbird that can lift the human heart with its tune and its wings.

Essential for Today

- A. And what we come to find is that hope is critical for human functioning and flourishing. We need it. We have to have it. We can’t live without it.

- B. This is an interesting consideration. Though hope is essentially oriented towards the future, it is utterly necessary for us if we are to function properly in the present.
1. Without it we deflate and die inwardly even if we are still alive on the outside. Some of you know what I'm talking about, acutely, personally.
 - a. When you lose hope you lose a reason to live. It is in this sense premature death. This is why those under weight of hopelessness find it undesirable and almost even impossible just to get out of bed in the morning. You feel there is nothing there for you out in the land of the living.
 - i. The human heart without hope is like a vehicle without gas, a balloon without helium, a lung without air, a bird without wings, a bulb without electricity, a world without color, a body without soul.
- C. Again, hope, while essentially oriented towards the future, is what animates us and keeps us going in the present.
1. This is the employee working hard at the office, hopeful even in the midst of such long hours because he knows, at the end of the week, vacation is coming. Rest.
 2. This is the pregnant mother who's not just willing to put up with the pains of carrying a baby, but excited about it, getting the little one's room ready, sending out notice, reading every book, celebrating at a baby shower, because she's hopeful of what this new addition to the family might mean, the joy it will bring.
 3. This is the boy who pursues the girl, with those butterflies in his stomach, hopeful that she might feel the same and reciprocate.
 4. These are the kids who, in their excitement for Christmas, create one of those paper chains at the beginning of December, breaking one link off each night in hope and with anticipation that the 25th is coming soon!
 - a. Hope may be oriented towards the future, it may have in view some better tomorrow, but it is absolutely essential for the present, for today.
- D. So I just want to ask, as we come to the end of this wild-ride of a year, how's your hope?
1. Is the thing with feathers singing and soaring in your spirit? Or does it seem to have fluttered away in the midst of the hardship and hurt? Are you hopeful? Or are you weary? Or maybe some strange mix of both?

(2) The Search for It

- A. With this there are two observations I want to bring out here in particular . . .

Observation #1: Our Search Presupposes Our Awareness of Brokenness

- A. First, our need and constant search for hope, for something to hope in, presupposes our awareness this world, as it presently is, is not all that it should be, that we're not all that we should be, that something's missing.
 - 1. The fact that we need to have expectation of a better tomorrow in order to get through today, tells us we all know whatever we have today is a bit broken, not quite perfect or ideal. We're always working towards something more because we would agree things are not exactly right as they stand now.
- B. This is quite an interesting observation to consider, especially when it comes to secular unbelieving people, like so many are in our culture.
 - 1. Even those who think there is no transcendent truth, no ultimate right and wrong, no spiritual reality, no afterlife, nothing but the material world as it stands—even these individuals, if they are honest, would still admit they feel like this world isn't what it should be, that they long for something more, even though they have no real basis for making sense of these intuitions.
 - a. If we're just animals, just a cluster of cells, if it's just survival of the fittest, you eat, drink, and you die, well then why do we feel like there's got to be more to life than this?
 - i. There's no real satisfactory way of explaining this outside of the fact that we were created for God and a world without sin and curse and death and brokenness. And we know it. We feel it. Something's wrong.
- C. Our need for hope to even function, our endless search for something to hope in, presupposes and exposes this fact.

Observation #2: We So Often Get It Wrong

- A. Now, the next thing we should say is that, if you noticed, we don't just leave our hope floating out in the air somewhere, do we? No, it's always attached to something—to something we think can bring that better tomorrow in for us, to something we think can finally satisfy and make what's wrong right.
 - 1. And this leads really to the second observation I wanted to make here and that is that, in our search for some worthy object of our hope, we so often get it wrong.
- B. Now, in one sense, even when our hope is attached to the wrong object, it can still fill us with excitement and energy at first, for a little while, but it is destined to fail us in one way or another in the end—and when it does we are left all the more hopeless.
 - 1. So let's imagine that you're single and you just long for that relationship with a significant other. You don't just long for it, you attach your hope to it. And, at last, you find it. Oh and

you're elated. This is what you've been waiting for. This is going fill your cup and make things right.

- a. But then, just a few months in, you discover that the person has been unfaithful to you. And your heart is dashed against the rocks. Whatever heights of joy you were taken to in the months prior can't compare to the depths of sorrow you are now drowning in.
 - i. Or even if the relationship is good, even the best are still broken. So you get in and you realize: "Oh marriage is hard, it's not all I thought it would be. I guess I should attach my hope to something else."
- C. And it's this same story that plays out again and again, not just in our relationships, but when we go after that other job, or get that degree, or purchase that house or car, or we join a gym and try to get that perfect body, or whatever.
 - 1. You attach your hope to something and maybe you get it, but then inevitably you realize it isn't the answer. It doesn't fix me. It doesn't fill me. Stuff's still broken, still not right.
 - 2. You know, I feel like some of us are just waiting for the year to change, let's get out of 2020, it's hexed, New Year's Eve, we're going to celebrate. Let's put this behind us. 2021 is a new year! But what if it's not. What if it still continues? What if the new strand in the UK comes our way? What if everything is still broken? What happens to your hope then?
- D. I think, in some ways, what our culture has done with Christmas is a good example of this. You remember the Grinch, how his big beef with those down in Whoville is they want all this stuff for Christmas, trinkets and toys, and they play with it for a little while, but then it inevitably ends up coming his way in the trash. And they move on to the next thing. Year after year. It doesn't fill them. That's it!
 - 1. Levi just had his fourth birthday and leading up to his birthday whenever we'd ask what he wanted he'd always say the same thing: a remote control car. So I did the research and I got him one. And he loved it . . . for like a day. But then on day two as he's playing with it, he turns to me and says: "Daddy I'd really like a remote control boat." Now, don't get me wrong, he still likes the car, but this is the sort of thing I'm talking about here. We attach all our hope to stuff that doesn't deliver. And we just keep moving from one to the next.
 - a. Like the woman at the well going from guy to guy.
 - b. Like the prodigal son going after parties and girls.
 - c. Like Judas, trading Jesus for a few pieces of silver.
 - i. We go we try and we try and we end up all the more broken and hopeless and sick because we never really find it. As it says in [Proverbs 13:12](#): "Hope deferred makes the heart sick . . ." When you keep hoping but it keeps letting you down, your heart gets sick.
- E. Some of us are feeling that. But, you know, it doesn't just have to make us sick. If we'd learn from it, it can also make us wise.

1. Eugene Peterson once wrote, "A person has to be thoroughly disgusted with the way things are to find the motivation to set out on the Christian way. As long as we think that the next election might eliminate crime and establish justice or another scientific breakthrough might save the environment or another pay raise might push us over the edge of anxiety into a life of tranquility, we are not likely to risk the arduous uncertainties of the life of faith. A person has to get fed up with the ways of the world before he, before she, acquires an appetite for the world of grace."
 - a. My guess is, for the Christians out there, most all of our testimonies involve some sense of: "I was attaching my hope to all the wrong things and then, finally, like the woman at the well I found living water in Jesus, like the prodigal son I came stumbling home into the open arms of God."

F. So I wanted to ask, where are you in this?

1. Are you still hitching your hope to one thing after the other after the other—"If this didn't do it, surely this will, if this didn't do it surely this will, if this didn't do it surely this will"—unwilling to consider Jesus?
2. Or are you tired and fed up with the ways of this world and longing for the world of grace? Because that's where we're going next . . .

(3) The Arrival of It

"A Thrill of Hope . . ."

- A. So now we come to Christmas and the arrival of hope, the advent of hope's only true object: namely, Jesus.
- B. I'm sure many of you recognized I ripped the title of this sermon from a line in that famous Christmas hymn: *O Holy Night*. And I wanted to consider the context there a little more. The lyrics read: "A thrill of hope / The weary world rejoices . . ."
1. But, then, why? For what reason? On what basis? It goes on: "For yonder breaks / A new and glorious morn."
- a. The author here is likening the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem to a sunrise. Hope breaking in to the thrill of hopeless hearts could also be described as light invading the darkness. In Jesus, it's as if "a new day has dawned."

In-Breaking Light

- A. This image of in-breaking light is really just drawn from the pages of Scripture. All throughout the coming of the Christ, the Savior of the world, is pictured along such lines.
- B. In the OT this is particularly true of the book of Isaiah:

1. [Isa 9:2, 6](#), foretelling the birth of Jesus, the prophet writes: “² The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. . . .⁶ For 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.”
 2. [Isaiah 49:6](#), speaking of the Messianic Servant, God says: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
 3. [Isaiah 60:1-3](#): “¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”
- C. In the NT, every gospel leverages this same sort of imagery when describing the birth of our Lord:
1. So Matthew tells us that Jesus comes in the night, but into the darkness shines light from a “star” rising ([Matt. 2:2](#)). Perhaps some sort of special cosmic phenomenon. More likely some sort of angelic manifestation. But, whatever it was, it’s a picture of hope breaking in.
 2. In Luke’s gospel, a phenomenon, perhaps related to this “star” in Matthew, occurs whereby in the dead of night, as Jesus’ is born, His birth is announced to these shepherds out in the field by an angel appearing in the heavens above where we’re told “the glory of the Lord shone” all around ([Luke 2:9](#)). Light interrupts the darkness.
 - a. This is why Zechariah speaks of Jesus as “the sunrise . . . from on high”—One who’s come “to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” ([Luke 1:78-79](#)).
 - b. Or Simeon speaks of Him as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” ([Luke 2:32](#)).
 3. John, in his gospel, blows the imagery out to cosmic proportions, [John 1:1-5, 9](#): “¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . .⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”

But Why? – The Darkness beneath the Darkness

- A. “A thrill of hope / The weary world rejoices / For yonder breaks / A new and glorious morn.” It’s something we all long for, something we all need, light breaking into the darkness.
1. But why do we say this is what happens in Bethlehem at Christmas with the arrival of Jesus. Why is this a new and glorious morn for the world?

- B. Well, you see there is a darkness beneath all other darkness, a brokenness beneath all other brokenness, a problem beneath all other problems—something that new technology, new toys, more education, more money, a new relationship, can't fix: namely, our sin.
 - 1. Jesus refuses to pass out band-aids for our cancer. He comes into our darkness and goes straight after its source. He's going to cut it out from the root.
- C. We always like to imagine the problem is out there somewhere, and we can fix it if we just get the right set of things together or whatever—we can crack the code of our brokenness.
 - 1. But the Bible's message is that the problem is in here, it begins with us, with our sin, and we can't fix it. We were created for God and yet our sin separates us from Him—so we're always going to feel half, incomplete, discontent.
 - a. We try to satisfy our hearts by lapping from the cisterns of this world, but they're all downstream from God who is the fountain of living water and if we're cut off from him, all lower levels go dry. That's why we feel broken and empty and hopeless.
- D. This is why Jesus is hope for a weary world in a way that nothing else is. Because He's come to deal with our sin and make a way for us to get back to God.

But How? – The Cross and Resurrection!

- A. What's happening here at the beginning of His earthly life is in many ways a foreshadow of what will come at the end of it, what He's really come to do for us. He is light breaking into the darkness.
 - 1. And so we see, during the last hours of His life, as He hung there on the cross, facing the wrath of God for our sin, the sky, though it's midday, just goes dark. He's entering the heart of darkness to rescue you and I.
 - 2. And then, do you remember, He goes into the grave, but what happens next. Well, the first day of the week, "at early dawn," Luke tells us ([Luke 24:1](#)) . . . He comes alive!
- B. Don't you see? It quite literally is the dawning of a new day. That's what this means. He rises as the Pioneer of a new creation.
 - 1. He's going to make all things new, starting with our hard hearts and working His way out to the world and the cosmos.
- C. Now, of course, there's still brokenness, right? We still struggle with hope.
 - 1. But something has changed. The wind has shifted. The clouds are dispelling. Jesus who came first in humility and weakness to be a sacrifice for our sins, will come again soon in power and glory to take us home.
- D. So listen, I don't know how all of you are doing right now. I imagine some of us are experiencing the dark night of the soul. But I do know, whatever's going on, Christmas is God's offer of hope.
 - 1. Not hope like the world gives, flimsy, perishable, with an expiration date.

2. But hope that's invincible like the person of Jesus Christ Himself—because that's what it's attached to.
- E. We like to make Christmas about all the gifts and things. And I suppose there's something alright with all of that. But at the end of the day Christmas is not about the gifts we give to one another. No, Christmas in its essence is about the gift God has given us all in Jesus.
1. In Him, He's given us forgiveness, salvation, adoption, resurrection, new creation, light in the darkness, but not least of all . . . He's given us hope!