

Sermon Series: "Receiving... Hope"
Salem United Methodist Church
Isaiah 9:2-7; Mark 1:1-8; 1 Peter 1:3-5
November 30, 2014
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While we in the church are called to wait for the coming of the Lord in this Advent season, our culture calls us to make a list of gifts and check it twice. So much of our time and efforts during these four weeks before Christmas is taken up with making sure we have just the right gift to give, yet we focus so little time on receiving. Advent is about waiting and preparing to receive. We will ask, "What will you receive this Christmas?" This is not the same question as, "What do you want for Christmas?" What will you receive this Christmas? And how will you receive it?

Receiving. It's not as easy as it sounds. I have to admit I am not always the most gracious receiver. I have received gifts in which I not only didn't say, "thank you," but I openly stated that I didn't like it! I have even been known to have said, "Why would you think I would like something like this?" I have learned that being a gracious receiver is a learned behavior. We know that the gracious thing to do is to say, "Thank you," whether we like the gift or not. We teach our children how to receive gifts graciously, too. Yet, we are not always the most gracious receivers. After all, the giver has made an effort to make or purchase an item with us in mind. If we don't like the gift, then later we can either exchange it or re-gift it, right? And we need to re-gift it to someone we know the original giver doesn't know. Think about what Christmas morning is like. I've heard families complain that children will open all their packages at one time and then turn and say, "Is that it?" The parents have spent hours of shopping for the gifts and lots of money only to have their children respond with, "Is that it?"

To truly receive a gift, we need to want it. Someone who is not thirsty will not open their mouths to receive a drink. Someone who does not want to see will close their eyes. Someone who does not want to receive will keep their hands, hearts, and minds closed. To be ready to receive anything, one has to want it. Maybe this is why many prefer Thanksgiving over Christmas. At Thanksgiving, we recognize what we have already received. During Christmas we receive often what we do not want. So we ask the question, "What do you want for Christmas?" We want to make sure that the gift we give is wanted so our efforts will be received. What do we really want this Christmas?

Each year we place the Advent Wreath in our sanctuary, our worship space. We begin with lighting just one candle. Then each Sunday of Advent we light another until all four are lit. Each candle represents a gift that God gives in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ. Today's candle represents Hope. When we hope for something, we are expecting or desiring it to happen. In the church this candle represents the hope of our salvation is coming as God becomes flesh in the life of Jesus. This is the hope we are expecting as the baby Jesus is realized. He represents the hope that God saves us from our sins to create in us new life. This is what the Apostle Peter was talking about. This candle represents us being born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And this candle represents the expected hope of the second coming of Jesus when all the world will be judged and redeemed. This first candle represents all this hope. There are days when horrible things happen in the news, when we lose someone we love, when we lose a job, when racial tensions explode into riots in Ferguson, when Isis terrorizes and kills innocent people. There are days when we see no hope for the world. This is when I want to cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus, come. We cannot help ourselves. Give us some hope! Come to us, now." I want hope now! I want peace now! I want people to love each other now! I want people's hearts to be filled with joy now! I want it now! I want! I want! I want! Sounds like a greedy child throwing a tantrum to get what they want, but wanting or needing something is the first step to being ready to receive. We need to want something to be able to receive it.

The prophet Isaiah knew this. The northern kingdom had just lost a war with Syria. There was much death and depression. The people were dwelling in a land as dark as death. They were struggling. There were moans and groans, cries and screams. The future seemed to be void of possibilities. And then the prophet Isaiah steps onto the stage and proclaims, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." Hope is born in the barren, desolate places. Hope comes when we continue to have faith even in desperate situations. This kind of hope is not just being

optimistic. This kind of hope means God holds the future. Have you ever felt this kind of hope? There is nothing like a holding a baby to offer us hope of a brighter future. Tomorrow we say good-bye to one of our beloved members, Flo Johnston. When she held her great-grandson for the first time, she felt this hope. Flo is to have said to this baby, "I am so sorry how we are leaving this world for you, but maybe you will make it a better place." That's hope. We cannot undo what is done, but we know God holds the future. Babies give us this kind of hope for tomorrow. This is the hope Isaiah offered when he talked about a son being born. Scholars believe that there may have been a son born to the ruling king that offered hope to this nation. However, Christians read back into this passage of Isaiah as pointing to Jesus, the Son of God. Only God's son could be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace! He is the light shining in the darkness. He is our hope. We hope for Jesus' return when he rules with peace and justice.

Christians read Jesus as the Messiah back into this passage because when Jesus was born about five to six hundred years after Isaiah, the people were living in darkness again. The world that Jesus was about to be born into was severely depressed. His homeland-to-be was an occupied nation, occupied by the powerful Roman government. His homeland was a police state. People never knew when the Roman soldiers would knock on their doors making demands that they would not be able to meet. Then the soldiers would raid and steal what they wanted. As punishment for not being able to meet their demands, the soldiers would steal the families' sons and/or daughters to be slaves. And/or torture the head of household and sometimes nail him to any kind of structure to hang there to die. This is the kind of fear and darkness the people of Israel were experiencing. The people were in need of hope yet again, a hope that God holds their future. This is kind of hope John the Baptist shouts, "Prepare the way of the Lord." God is coming. Get ready. "One stronger than I is coming after me. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Mark opens his Gospel with these words of hope from John the Baptist, but even before that he states, "The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son." Do you hear it? This is the beginning of hope. Jesus is about hope. This is the good news. Do you hear it?

Hope comes through listening to those who envision hope, who offer hope to those who are ready to receive hope. During the time of John the Baptist, there were those who missed this hope because they either just didn't listen or refused to listen. God offers hope to people who are ready to listen and ready to receive it.

This past Tuesday evening I witnessed a community that was ready to listen for hope, ready to receive hope, and ready to offer hope. Jews, Christians (Protestants and Catholics), and Muslims gathered to pray together, to sing together, to listen to each other, and to give thanks to God together. We sat beside each other and ate together afterwards. It was a remarkable evening of hope. The interfaith Thanksgiving service was a signpost of hope pointing that people in this community can live peacefully together. We can honor our similarities as we respect our differences. We gave thanks for the first responders who we rely on in times of an emergency. They enter our homes and businesses willing to offer hope without any judgment or prejudice even to the point of putting their own lives on the line. We, also, recognized that there is hunger and financial need in our affluent community as we took up an offering to offer hope to those in need through Olney Help. Yes, there is much despair in Ferguson, Missouri. Yes, there is darkness spread by Isis, but on Tuesday evening, there was a light of hope shining out of B'nai Shalom synagogue in Olney as we gave thanks to God together.

Hope is born out of times of despair, times of darkness, times of depression. During these times we are to wait and listen, wait and watch. Hope is not about survival, but it is a way to live. It is about waiting, listening, watching, and being prepared to receive. With this way of life, God will surprise us again and again with the gift of hope, the gift of new beginnings. This gift of hope reveals to us new possibilities. We witness once again, the light shining in the darkness. This light shines as God comes in flesh to offer us hope and salvation. This light shines as Jesus is with us now offering hope and salvation for us today. And this light shines with the promise that Jesus will come again offering us the hope of a life to come and salvation for all. We wait in hope and expectancy to receive this great gift.

Reflection Questions: During this Advent, what do you hope for? How will you receive it?

Resources: *All I Want For Christmas* by James Harnish