

Advent Sermon Series: Advent: God's Gift of New Hope
Sermon Title: What is Hope?
Jeremiah 33:14-16; I Thessalonians 4:9-13; Luke 21:25-36
Salem United Methodist Church; December 2, 2018
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Advent is a strange time of the year. Our scriptures are bizarre as we hear of the end times. There is no heartwarming baby in the manger yet. While the whirlwind of the Christmas festivities has already begun, in the church a New Year has begun with Advent, a time of longing and waiting expectantly. We long for and need hope, a new hope. This year our Advent focus will be on New Hope as a Gift from God.

There is a sense of hopelessness in our world. Many young adult millennials are feeling hopeless. They have gone to college, accumulating a large debt. Then weren't able to get a job in their field so they took lower paying jobs. They can't afford healthcare or housing so they moved back to their parents' home. Anxiety and depression is common place among millennials. They ease their pain and forget their circumstances for a little while with drugs and alcohol, binge watching movies, or playing video games.

The millennials aren't the only ones who feel a sense of hopelessness today. Everyone one of us has challenges in our personal lives that seem overwhelming. And then there are international conflicts, wars, terrorism, mass shootings, the impact of climate change, the issues over immigration, racial tension, and the loss of employment for 14,000 GM workers. We live in a time of restlessness, uncertainty, and fear. Can we have hope in times like these? How important is hope? What is hope?

According to the dictionary, hope is "a feeling of wanting something to happen and thinking that it could happen; a feeling that something good will happen or be true." Synonyms for hope are expect, anticipate, and wish. Little ones have confidence when they hope, expect, anticipate, and wish for presents from Santa on Christmas Eve. Their anticipation and hope brings a sense of optimism. Paul has this sense of optimism in the words he wrote to the church at Thessalonica. This letter is the oldest writing in the New Testament. This church is a brand new Christian community. These new Christians are learning as they go. Paul prays for them to grow in their love for each other and for everyone! Paul also prays for love to strengthen their relationship with God as they wait for Paul to return to them, but more importantly as they wait for our Lord Jesus to return. The coming of Jesus is at the center of their hope. They believed Jesus would return in their lifetime. Paul's hope for these new followers of Jesus is that their love for everyone will "increase and enrich." Can this kind of hope ever become a reality? Can we really love everyone? It's one thing to say we love the people in the church, but even this is challenging when we have different political and religious perspectives, isn't it? So to say we are to love someone outside of the church, outside of our circle of friends, to say we are to love someone who is culturally different, who is racially different, who has a different faith is next to impossible a pessimist might say. If it is impossible, then there is no hope for this world. Paul didn't see it that way. For Paul hope is based in loving God and loving everyone. Then the world will have peace and joy. As I read this scripture of Paul I hear John Lennon's song, "Imagine." "Imagine there's no countries (Me: no borders to cross, either), nothing to kill or die for, and no religion, too. Imagine all the people living life in peace. Imagine no possessions... No need for greed or hunger... Imagine all the people sharing all the world... You may say I'm a dreamer, But I'm not the only one, I hope someday you'll join us, And the world will be as one." Were John Lennon and the Apostle Paul wishful thinkers? Dizzy dreamers? Or were they describing the Kingdom of God coming to earth as Jesus described?

The people of Jeremiah's time may have seen him as a dizzy dreamer. Everything they knew was destroyed. Their families, homes, city, beloved Temple, everything was gone. Jeremiah had prophesized gloom and doom would happen unless they turned back to God. They didn't heed he prophesy and it came true. Then Jeremiah boldly proclaims for God that God will make both Israel and Judah great again like it was during the time of King David. He will be a king that is righteous, a king that will do the right thing by the people, a king of justice and mercy. For the exiled Jews these words must have seemed like wishful thinking, yet there was a part of them that wanted to believe and a part of them that needed this hope. Eventually this hope became a

reality for them. We as Christians believe that the person Jeremiah is talking about is the Son of God, yet a descendent of David, Jesus our Christ.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus prophesized, too. He prophesized what the world would be like at the end of time. There will be one catastrophe after another. Every generation has been faced with different catastrophes such as wars, famines, earthquakes, economic depressions, etc. And each generation has claimed that the end was near. Today we could say the end is near with climate change that causes droughts so the dry landscape is ripe for uncontrollable fires. We could say the end is near when there are cataclysmic earthquakes, tsunamis, devastating tornadoes, massive hurricanes, and other devastating weather events. These events can destroy whole communities, killing hundreds of people, and causing even more people to lose everything they have and know. For the survivors life can seem hopeless. Jesus says, “Don’t dull your pain and the anxieties of life with drinking. Stay strong. Stand up straight. Lift up your head. Keep the faith. I am with you.” Those are words of encouragement, but those are also words of hope. No matter what happens or when it happens, we are never alone.

Because it is difficult to describe intangible things like faith and hope, we use analogies to help us. Jesus was a master at using analogies to describe the intangible Kingdom of God. Hebrews 6:19 states that, hope is like an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. The term, anchor, is a good analogy for the intangible term, hope. Think about how anchors are used. Boats use anchors to keep them in one spot and not be adrift at sea. Anchors are also used in the construction of tall buildings and skyscrapers. To anchor a tall building, holes are drilled deep into the earth and concrete is poured to form columns or pilings which hopefully will secure the multi-story building. Skyscrapers need even more secure anchoring, so the builders will drill a helical pier, which is a very large type of screw, deep into the ground to hopefully anchor the building. The deeper into the earth these anchors are placed the more firm the foundation is and the more secure these buildings will be. No one wants to be on any floor of a building with an insecure foundation. Hope in Jesus acts like a piling or helical pier keeping us secure no matter what challenges we face.

Nelson Mandela, the South African freedom fighter, must have had his spiritual anchor secured very deep into the soil of God to have survived torture and twenty-seven years of suffering in prison. Recently some of his letters from prison were published. They give us a glimpse into his soul as he suffered appalling conditions for his anti-apartheid activism. How did he survive? He wrote, “Remember that hope is a powerful weapon even when all else is lost.” He also wrote about the saints of biblical times who visualized a new just world with no wars, famine, and disease. He wrote that this is the world that he is fighting for, a world where there is no more racial intolerance. His fight cost him illness, pain, suffering, and not being present for the funerals of close family members. Through all of this, Mandela clung to his religious convictions and hope was one of them. Today Mandela is a beacon of hope for not only the people of South Africa, but all over the world. He knew his cause was just and hope became his anchor as he fought for human dignity. His anchor was in the Lord, our Righteousness.

For me no matter what happens in my life: illness, loss of loved ones, devastating natural events, or violence, I hope that I have driven my spiritual pilings and sunk my spiritual anchor deep enough so that no matter what comes my way, I will hold firm in the soil of the love of Jesus, trusting that Jesus is greater than any and all pain and suffering.

Prayer: Jesus, you are the anchor of our hope. In you we find righteousness. Remind us again that our hope is not found in our material things, but in the biblical witness to your faithfulness in times past and to your purpose for us now and in the future. Align our hopes with your purpose so that we can serve and love all people as we offer all the hope of your righteousness. Come, Lord Jesus, come once again and be our new hope. Amen.

Resources: *Advent: The Gift of New Hope* by Christopher Webber; *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.

