

Hopeful Yearning

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It's such a joy to celebrate with you all this morning. What a wonderful season as we transition from Thanksgiving, and the opportunity that it gives us to lift up our songs and our prayers of thanks and then move into the Christmas season. This time of anticipation in which Emmanuel--God with us, becomes the focus of so much that we do and that we think and the focus of our worship.

It was a joy just to stand there and to listen to you lifting up praise to our Lord together. We are doing the Advent wreath this year and the Advent candles. That first candle we lit was the candle of Hope and then each of the coming three Sundays after this one we will have another candle as well as another Advent theme. A very dear friend of mine was known to say that a human being can go for a whole month, even longer, without food. Three or four days without water. Five, eight, up to 15 minutes without air. But not one second without hope. Hope is so important to who we are.

It's the lack of hope that makes the sad situation so poignant when little Lucy finds her way through the wardrobe into the magical country of Narnia. When she returns and is talking with her two brothers and her sister about it, she relays the terrible news. Not only is there a white witch who oppressively reigns over that land, but she has made it such that it is always winter, but never Christmas. Of all of the horrors of the white witch's reign, that is the one that strikes closest to home for her. Imagine it! Always winter, but never Christmas. The dreary, depressing days pass one to the other, with the low foreboding clouds and the short days, but never that hope of the Christmas season. Well, we're living in these days of Christmas anticipation.

I remember back in my own childhood the building excitement. It doesn't wane as December 25th gets closer. It gets stronger and stronger. A few more presents are there, you see them wrapped. I tried to undo the tape and peek inside and see what might be there. The excitement keeps building. I would beg and beg and beg to be able to open one present on Christmas Eve. And I remember when I was allowed to it was pajamas, complete with footies that I could wear down the stairs the next day, Christmas morning. And the next year I begged and begged and begged to open a present. It took me a few years to catch on that it was always pajamas.

But the anticipation, the anticipation fills little children's eyes and hearts with joy and not a few of us grown-ups. I am certain that some of you have been looking forward to Christmas for about six months, and many of you couldn't wait until the day after Thanksgiving to set

up your trees. They were probably set up earlier in November, and the music is playing and the season is building in anticipation of waiting and longing and hoping because we know that that day is coming.

A. Longing and Hoping

And that's a good example of biblical hope. Biblical hope is waiting patiently for something that we are confidently expecting. It's not like, "Gee, I hope Christmas comes this year." We know December 25th is Christmas, and so we are confidently expecting that day to come. And in the days building up to it, we wait with longing and joyful anticipation. The idea of waiting with longing and with hoping is something that has been with us from the earliest days of humanity, from the first pages of Scripture, from not long after the days of creation.

1. Something is missing

Because from early on, we have known that there is something missing in our lives, something that we long to be fulfilled and that we hope will be satisfied. See, if we go back--and the story of Christmas begins in Genesis chapter one--if we go back to the earliest days of creation and God's intention in all of the beauty that He created, it was for peace and harmony to reign. For perfect relationships between God and human beings, between Adam and Eve and the race that would come from them, between human beings and all of creation.

God designed a world in which there was no pain, in which there was no suffering, no abuse, no disappointment. God designed a world in which Adam and Eve would walk with Him in unbroken fellowship. Face to face, fellowshiping with the living God with no fear, with no shame, with no doubt, no worry. All of them completely exposed to God, and Him relating to them in love and compassion and friendship. God created Adam and Eve to work together as a perfect team, and together to steward the beautiful creation that He had made, and to have a harmonious relationship with all of the created world. And His intention was that that would continue and be unbroken.

But then, of course, we know that that's not the end of the story. That the serpent, the deceiver of old, began to whisper: "There's a shortcut to achieve the things that you desire. Don't follow God's way. Instead, follow my way. Follow your own way. Grab hold of the things that you desire." And when Adam and Eve listened to the serpent and introduced sin into the world, they introduced disruption and brokenness into everything that God had created. And with the fall comes the longing, the longing for things to be the way that God had designed them to be.

2. The promised answer

Every time that we sense something is not right in the world we are despairing for what was lost. But the great thing is that in those early pages of Scripture, we are given hope as well. That in addition to the awareness that something is missing, there's a promised answer. You see, Adam and Eve and all of us had to suffer the consequences of sin. God pronounced curses on all of creation as a result of their fall. And so to this very day, the sickness that we experience, the death that we mourn, the injustice that we observe in the world around us and that pains us so deeply. Senseless tragedies that make us say it should not be that way, abuses that break our hearts.

Everything that is wrong with the world goes back to that moment and makes us say, "It's not supposed to be that way." Don't you feel that sometimes? It's not supposed to be that way, and you're absolutely right. It's not. God didn't create it to be that way. That's not what He created us for. That longing within our hearts is placed there in order to point us to the answer that He would provide, in order to bring renewal and restoration and a return to His design.

And so He made the promise there in the Garden of Eden that He would make it right. That promise is what's often referred to as the first expression of the gospel. We read it in Genesis 3:15, where God is pronouncing His curse upon the serpent, and He says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you [serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;" The offspring of the woman. This is the promise: Someone would be born of the woman Who will crush the serpent's head. But in doing so He Himself would be injured. "He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel." And from Genesis 3:15 all through the rest of Old Testament Scripture, we have the story of the long-awaited Promised One, the story of a people who are hoping for the Messiah,

That story is developed later on in Genesis as we are introduced to Abraham, and God makes promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 15. It's a very similar promise: "Through your own offspring all the nations of the world will be blessed." That promise continues through Moses. We read that promise again given to David in second Samuel chapter seven, when the covenant between God and David is pronounced by the prophet Nathan. Nathan says, "Someone will come from you, a King whose rule will be established forever." An unending kingdom. That day is coming. The Messiah is coming. The promises will be fulfilled.

3. The long-awaited Messiah

The promise continues through the prophets. Isaiah 9:6-7; we love to read it at Christmastime: "A Son will be born. The government will be on His shoulders. He will be

called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.” All through the Scriptures of the Old Testament, through the history and through the prophets that promise builds. But they’re always looking ahead. Hebrews chapter 11 describes all of the Old Testament heroes of the faith for us. And the author says all of them were looking forward to something that they did not receive. Longing, hoping, knowing that something is wrong, that something is missing. That God has promised the answer is coming. And so, looking forward and waiting with anticipation: when will the promises be fulfilled?

Through those Scriptures the promises are developed. One of the things that we learned is, yes, this is a King Who is coming, and His kingdom will never end. But this is a Messiah who must suffer. This is a Messiah who will die and be raised from the dead. And so the hope of the resurrection is built into the promises about the Messiah. David writes not about himself, but about the one who is coming. “My body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you allow your Holy One to see decay.” Knowing the Messiah is coming, He will suffer, but He will not remain in the grave. He will be resurrected to victory.

The promise develops also with the theme of the hope for the nations. And so we just read from Isaiah 42 that his message will be a message of hope for all peoples. And this promise, this hope, this longing for the Messiah persisted all the way through to the very last of the prophets. Where you have Malachi telling us that the long-awaited One, the Desire of the nations will come, that the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings. Many of you know that then after Malachi we enter what's called the 400 silent years. No prophets, no word from the Lord, but the hope didn't die. When the apostle Paul at the end of Acts is called upon to defend his ministry, four different times he said, “I am standing before you because of the hope of Israel, that One will come Who will be resurrected from the dead.” That sense of hope, that sense of longing never left that people who knew that something is wrong in the world but God is going to make it right. He promised a Messiah will come.

B. Jesus is the answer

1. Promises fulfilled

And then, of course, Jesus is the answer to all of those promises. We get the first inklings of the promise being fulfilled when we read the birth narrative in Luke chapters one and two, and then when we read about Jesus's earliest ministry. Luke one opens with Zachariah, faithful priest Zechariah serving in the temple, and his wife Elizabeth. The two of them

longing, hoping, those many years unfulfilled as they waited for their own child to be born. Known as barren. But then the promise comes and they give birth to a son, John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. And when Zechariah's lips are opened after his son is born, he doesn't talk about that baby. He talks about the promised One Who is coming. He lifts up praise to God who has remembered to rescue His people, who has brought salvation as He promised. Zechariah knew the promises. He was waiting for them to be fulfilled, and he recognized that those were the days of fulfillment.

After Jesus is born and his parents bring Him into the temple, they are met by old Simeon, who looks upon that baby and says, "Lord, You can now take Your servant as You have promised, my eyes have seen." And then the old widow Anna, who had been looking forward to the consolation of Israel, sees it fulfilled in that little baby. A few pages later, Jesus, now grown, walks into the synagogue. He reads the famous prophecy of Isaiah 61 and He says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

And so what we read earlier, we see fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Our friends read from Isaiah 42 while lighting the first Advent candle. Those words are quoted regarding the ministry and life of Jesus in Matthew chapter 12:17-21: "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'Here is My servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, and whom I delight. I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out, until He has brought justice through to victory. In His name the nations will put their hope.'"

2. Hope in Jesus

For those long millennia, everybody who knew that something was wrong in the world. That something was missing. That a promise was made that was going to be fulfilled. They had hope, and that hope was satisfied in Jesus Christ. And satisfied not only for them, satisfied for us, too. We have our hopes met in Jesus. Paul, when he's writing to his disciple Timothy, calls Jesus Christ our hope: my hope and yours.

C. Longing and hoping

1. Deliverance

One of the things that we lost not only in the garden when Adam and Eve sinned, but when each one of us chooses our way over God's way, when we exalt our self over God, when we choose to follow our desires, to worship our humanity instead of worshiping God, one of the things we lost was righteousness that is required. Well, the perfect life of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of our hope, our need, of righteousness. One of the things that came as a

consequence of sin in the garden is suffering. But Jesus Christ is our redemption. When He went to the cross, He took upon Himself all of our suffering, bore upon Himself all of the wrath of God in our place. And so our hope of redemption is satisfied in Jesus Christ. He bore our sins to satisfy our hope of salvation. He rose from the dead to fulfill our hope of victory over sin, over death, and all of its consequences. His exaltation and Sonship is the guarantee of our adoption, brought back into the family of God, able to fellowship with Him, boldly coming into the presence of the living God like a son or a daughter. Because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of our hope and our longing and His eternal reign is the satisfaction of our longing for eternal life in glory.

Jesus Christ came for you, for each one of us, and for a world that sometimes feels like it's living in always winter and never Christmas. A world that feels like things are just wrong. They shouldn't be that way. Jesus Christ is the answer. But one of the things we have to recognize is that sometimes the fulfillment of those hopes looks a little different than we had hoped.

Many of you are familiar with the story of two disciples walking along Emmaus Road after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They don't even recognize it, but Jesus joins them and He says, "what are you talking about as you're walking along?" And they're like, "What else is there to be talking about? Haven't you heard? There was Jesus, and we had hoped, we had hoped that He was the one, but He's dead. Now somebody is telling stories of His resurrection. We have no idea what's going on." And Jesus Himself says, "Oh, you foolish ones, don't you understand?" And so He opens up all of the Scriptures from Genesis all the way to Malachi and says, "Don't you see all the way through how those promises are to be fulfilled in a Messiah who suffers and dies and rises from the dead?" Their hope had been met, their longing had been fulfilled, but they didn't see it because they were looking for something else.

Jesus is the answer. But sometimes we don't see that because it doesn't look exactly like what we had longed for. The kingdom of God is real, and it is growing, but it certainly is not manifest in such a way that God's reign is unquestioned and unchallenged in this world. The end of sin and suffering and sickness has been accomplished, but we still suffer with it in our days as we walk this earth. We look around us and there's still injustice and there's still abuse and still tragedy and the things that make us scratch our heads and say something's not right in this world. And so we are still left in this situation.

Jesus Christ, the answer, has come. Salvation has been purchased. It's available to you and me. But we still have this longing and this hoping. And even Christmastime for many of us, is a painful reminder of loss, of grief, and of longing. I'm supposed to be happy about December 25th coming up, but there's still so much pain in my life. We long and we wait for

final deliverance because we still struggle with sin. One of the things that increases in me as a longing, as I continue to grow in my relationship with Jesus Christ, is for that day when all temptation and all sin is removed.

Can you imagine a day is coming when we will be completely delivered from every effect of sin? No more temptation, no more struggle, no more longing for that perfection that we were created for. Final redemption will be ours. We still struggle with sickness, with the effects of sin and these fallen bodies that Paul describes as subject to decay. And so, using his words: we long, we groan as we wait for the final redemption of our bodies. We pray, and sometimes we experience healing. But even that healing is a healing that restores us to a life that will eventually end in death unless Jesus Christ comes first.

The final and great and glorious healing, the deliverance from these bodies that are subject to decay still is yet to come. And we still live in a world in which we're subjected to persecution, to hatred because of the name of Jesus Christ. We experience a little bit in our lives and we're afraid of it. We don't want our neighbors to reject us, to mock us, to shun us because of our faith. And so we're afraid to speak up, maybe afraid to invite them to Christmas at the Coffeehouse, because we live in a world where we still might and do experience persecution. And there are others around the world who experience persecution to an extent that we can't even imagine. And we cry out, along with the martyrs waiting before the throne, "How long, O Lord? How long?" We still have this longing and this hoping for the final deliverance when we pray, come, Lord Jesus.

2. Glory

We still wait for glory. I don't know about you, but it doesn't take me long after I open my eyes in the morning to realize the glory hasn't yet completely come. We were created in God's image. The glory of God is built into our bones. And yet, as we live and walk through our days, we see that we are so far from an experience of glory manifest among us and uninterrupted. Paul tells the believers in Colossae, in Colossians 1:27, that "God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of a mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

3. The Kingdom of God

Jesus Christ is our hope. All the glory of God is actually living inside everyone who believes in Jesus because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. But there's a disconnect between that spiritual reality and our daily walk. And so we're longing for that thing that we were created for. The glory of the image of God to be completely manifest in us and in our lives. And we long for the kingdom of God to be established in the terms that have been promised from

the very beginning. For holiness, justice, peace, and harmony to reign on this earth unquestioned. For the presence of God among us again, as is described in the final pages of Revelation. We long for the final, complete reversal of the curse and restoration of all that we have lost.

All through the pages of Scripture, people have been filled with longing. Things are not the way they're supposed to be. God gave the answer in Jesus Christ. And in His life and death and resurrection, He brought the redemption and the reconciliation that we long for. But we still wait. Like a child on Christmas morning, we know the day is coming. It's promised to us in the last pages of Scripture. We wait in hopeful longing for the final redemption to be established.

Hopeful waiting is...

--Patiently enduring

And so what does hopeful waiting look like for us? Scripture tells us very clearly. Hopeful waiting is patiently enduring. December 25th is coming, but it's still November 30th. Kids, those presents are going to get wrapped, but you can't open them yet. Now, I don't know if we can always describe that waiting for Christmas Day as patient waiting. Maybe it's fidgety waiting. Maybe it's cheating waiting, to peek under the wrapping. But the kind of waiting that we have as we long for the appearing of Jesus Christ is supposed to be patient waiting. This is how Paul describes it in Romans 8:23-25--this is the groaning of all of creation in a fallen world. “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit [who've already been redeemed], groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”

Are you suffering? Is Christmas actually a painful time as you're reminded of loss or of grief? Do you look at the world around and the fact that things are not right, does it pain you deeply? That's okay. We were created for something else, and God has built into us a longing for something else. But we do not suffer, we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We know the day is coming. And so whatever the pain is that you are enduring this Christmas season, God says you can be patient. You can endure because you have hope in Jesus Christ. Hopeful waiting is patiently enduring.

--Becoming like Him

Hopeful waiting is also becoming like Him. This is our first priority in these days that we have on earth: becoming like Him. This is how John described it, first John 3:2-3: “Dear

friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.”

We're not sitting back waiting for that day of glorification. We are allowing Him to work in us now and our first priority day in and day out, if we are a people of hope, is becoming like Him today. All who have this hope in Him purify themselves just as He is pure. Not our career as our first priority, not even our family as our first priority. Jesus Christ as our first priority. Because our hope is in Him and Him alone.

--Ready to answer

And then finally, waiting patiently is being ready to answer. First Peter 3:15, to a suffering church Peter writes: “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” If we are a light in a dark world, if we have hope in a dreary and depressing place where it seems like there's always winter but no Christmas, and people will ask, what's the reason for the hope? Waiting patiently is being always ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us. Let's pray together as our elders come forward for communion.

Heavenly Father, there is so much joy, there is so much hope this season. Thank You that every day is a day that we can celebrate Jesus. But this is a time of year in which our attention is directed to the wonderful gift of your Son. Lord, I pray for myself. I pray for my church family that as we go through this season, and so often it becomes a distraction or a burden even, all of the preparations that are necessary. That in those moments of busyness and stress that You would turn the eyes of our hearts to things above and not to earthly things, that You would help us to fix our gaze on Jesus Christ, who is our hope, not a wishful longing. Not an uncertain desire, but Jesus Christ, who is our very real and very present hope. Thank You. Thank You that when we are not filled with giddy feelings, thank You that when we are pained by circumstances or what's going on in our own hearts, that we know that there is something more. That we have a Savior Who has come and on Whom we can fix our hopes unwaveringly with confident expectation that every promise You ever made will be fulfilled. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.