

HOPE

TEXT: Isaiah 2:1-5

Hope is such a beautiful word. It tells us that there is something better coming. The world, as we know it, will not be the last word. God has great plans for God's creation, and we live in the hope that this brings us.

We are focusing on the words from the prophet Isaiah for Advent this year. And the word that comes to us today is "Hope". It was indeed a word that spoke to the Israelites in the time of Isaiah. Israel had a troubled history. She was a tiny nation wedged between huge and ambitious empires that were constantly vying for superiority. There were few times in Israel's 700 year history in which she did not live under threat. Wars were almost constant, some were devastating. For much of her existence she lived under the sovereignty of some other nation, unable or sometimes unwilling to establish her own existence in the world as God's people.

So today I have a question for you. What is your hope? No matter how good your life is right now, we are all living in the hope that things will get better. Nobody wants just more of today. We can't survive without hope.

So, again, what is your hope? Is it a certain level of income? The perfect romantic partner? A certain level of career success? We're all hoping for something. To be human is to hope. The problem, even if we have hope, is twofold: life is hard, and our hopes don't deliver as much as we desired. Usually the thing that we hoped for doesn't turn out to be as good as we'd hoped it would be. Or it doesn't last that long. Even if it does, it still doesn't satisfy us as we'd hoped.

Historian Daniel Boorstin suggests that we suffer from all-too-extravagant expectations. In his often-quoted book *The Image* he makes this observation:

“We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious, luxurious cars which are economical. We expect to be rich and charitable, powerful and merciful, active and reflective, kind and competitive. We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a “church of our choice” and yet feel its guiding power over us, to revere God and to be God. Never have people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never have a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never have a people expected so much more than the world could offer.”

Isaiah prophesied to the Israelites over 2700 years ago during a time when things weren't very good. Moses had told them that God had promised to set them in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations, and that they would be a people holy to the Lord their God, as he promised. But Israel felt like a two-bit backroads state with not much going for it. Israel knew war and destruction, living under the shadow of the great Assyrian empire that threatened to swallow it up at any moment. Talk about disappointment! God's promises didn't seem to be coming true. On top of that, Isaiah hardly seemed to be helping things, condemning the wickedness of the nation. He warns them that they are enamored with greatness, but they will be humiliated and desolated. Things will get so bad that he says that people will flee to caves and rocks and to holes in the ground. He even says that behind all this is the mighty hand of God!

It's like he's saying, “I have bad news. Things are really bad.” And then the people say, “I know”. And then Isaiah says, “I have even worse news. You're evil”. And the people say, “that's rough”. Then Isaiah says, “I have even worse news than that. God is opposed to you, and things are going to get worse.”

Isaiah was a prophet who was willing to tell us hard things and to get to the root of the issue. Life is hard. The situation around us is often challenging. Underlying that is the reality of our sinfulness and the consequences of the decisions we make. We can't deny reality. We must face the bad news before we're ready for God's good news. The Bible is a very realistic book. It never asks us to pretend that things are better than they

really are. The Bible looks unflinchingly at life and acknowledges that it is brutally hard. And that should give us hope because what God reveals in his word is realistic enough that it will help us in the worst circumstances we'll ever encounter. God does us the favor of telling us the truth, even when it's hard to hear, even when we're going through the worst circumstances in life.

But there were those like Isaiah 2700 years ago, and there are some today who can envision a different reality, who can hope for a time when the people would be faithful and allow God to be God. Israel was weary of war and threat, weary of the divisions that had torn her country apart. Some, like Isaiah knew that God's vision of the world was much different. They knew that the God they served was the same God who had heard the cries of oppressed slaves in Egypt and entered history to relieve their oppression. And they knew that because God was such a God, he would not forever tolerate oppression in the world.

And so they hoped. And so we hope. And they dreamed. And we dream. They dreamed of a time when God would enter the world and bring an end to war and suffering, when God would establish his reign on earth and restore all creation to what he intended it to be. They dreamed of a time when the division that had torn their people apart and divided them into north and south might be healed, and they could once again be a whole people under God. They dreamed of a time when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more".

Aren't these our hopes and dreams as well? What Isaiah said to Israel is just as important for us to hear as it was for Israel's audience 2700 years ago.

First, we can't expect to be fully satisfied here and now. Our hope will never ultimately be satisfied on this earth. Our present circumstances are very uncertain. We have good days and bad days. As good as life gets it will ever stop being hard. But we were meant to enjoy this life without depending on it for our ultimate satisfaction. The Bible would tell us: enjoy all of God's blessings here. Live it up. Drink good wine. Eat

good food. Make friends, and really enjoy your times with them. Pursue great work. But never think that if you have all of these things that you'll be happy. Isaiah tells us to enjoy this life, but don't expect to be satisfied by it.

Then he tells us not to look for the solution within ourselves. Isaiah points us to something beyond ourselves. He gives us a picture of something only God can do. We gather together not to learn how to be better people, but to look to Jesus who knows that we're not always good people but God has done everything needed to meet us in our need.

Finally Isaiah gives us a promise of what God promises to do. God promises to raise Mount Zion in Jerusalem, site of the Temple, as the highest mountain in the world. And then God promises that all the nations will flow to it. They will come voluntarily, seeking the Lord. No more nationalism. No more division. Everyone will be hungry for what the God of Israel alone can provide. This was the hope of Isaiah's people and that is still our hope today.

Advent. Christmas. Peace on earth has already come 2,000 years ago. But it has not fully come yet. It has only come as a glimpse of what *can* be. The fulfillment of the promises has become new promises and expectations. And so we dream Isaiah's dream again. We dream the dream of a divided people that God will bring to wholeness, even as we hammer on our swords and spears trying to make plowshares.

When? How long? When will that day come? We do not know. But we hope and wait expectantly. We live today in the reality of what God has already showed us, and what God has promised. And we cry out for his coming. And we know that as he *has* come, so he *will* come. When he comes, may he find us hard at work hammering our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks.

There is a lovely story of a wise old Rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day

begins?” After thinking for a moment, one student replied, “It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat.” Another student ventured, “It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree.”

The old Rabbi gently said, “No. It is when you can look into a man’s face and recognize him as your brother. For if you cannot recognize in another’s face the face of your brother, the darkness has not yet begun to lift, and the light has not yet come.”

This is our Advent hope for the world. Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus. And as we wait and hope, we grab our swords. We have plowshares to make! Amen.