

THE ADVENT CONSPIRACY – THE GIFT OF HOPE
 Sunday, November 28, 2010
 Mark Statler

Welcome to Advent 2010! Advent is a season that anticipates and prepares for Christmas, the arrival of the messiah. Christians for centuries have used this time as a time to reflect and prepare, not just for the re-enactment of the birth of Jesus, but also as a season to anticipate and prepare for Jesus return, his second coming. **Advent** comes from a Latin word and it means “**something is coming...something is about to happen.**”

This year, we are preparing for Advent here at Saint Paul’s through a message series called the Advent Conspiracy. **A conspiracy is a plot to overturn an existing structure or reality.** There is a movement among churches of all denominations happening in our country and even around the world over the last couple of years. That movement is to rethink how we celebrate Christmas and make some changes if necessary. You can go to **adventconspiracy.org** to learn more. So that is where the idea of a conspiracy happens...plan to change the practices of Christians to greater reflect the worship and love of God.

In this series, when we talk about conspiracy, we are not talking about an evil plot or something sinister. We are using the word “conspiracy” in the sense that message of Jesus does overturn an existing reality. We’re going to look at the ways that the Messiah embodied Hope, Peace, Joy and Love in ways that went beyond and changed life; How the gifts this Messiah brings into the world will overturn the power of sin and darkness. Evil wants to defeat us and tell us we are trapped – there is no hope! Today, we are going to talk about how God’s messiah brings us hope.

Today we are looking at the **Gift of Hope.** Hope is one of the great gifts we celebrate in advent – a gift we anticipate arriving in its fullness in Christ, God made flesh.

When I was a kid, I used to hope to be a major league second baseman. Now just so you know, that’s not the kind of hope we are looking at today. There is a big difference between hope that rises from our faith (hope placed in God) and a pipedream fantasy! What we are talking about today is not just a wish or desire we would like to see come true. We’ve all placed our hope in something or someone only to be disappointed. The 2004 Cardinals for example. Not only did they lose the World Series, but they got swept by a team under the curse of the Bambino that hadn’t won a World Series since 1918. That’s disappointment.

People disappoint us too. We put our hope in people and maybe most of the time they come through. But people aren’t perfect and at some point they disappoint us too. This happens in marriages – and that’s why it is so critical that we infuse a lot of grace and forgiveness and renewed trust into our marriage and familial relationships.

What we’re talking about, the kind of hope I am talking about, is our ability to trust and hold onto the promises of God. This is about faith and the hope that is directly connected to our ability to trust God. And to get a good picture at this kind of hope, we need to look back to the prophets of the Old Testament and the message of hope they spoke for God to the people around them, then we will see how that message of hope finds its fullness in the coming of Jesus, in his ministry, and in his words. So as we turn to the Old Testament prophets, I want to just share a few things with you to help you understand the prophets and their messages.

The word, “**Prophet**” = Hebrew “**Navi**” = **mouthpiece**. So a prophet is a mouthpiece, or spokesperson for God. The role of the prophet finds its beginnings in Moses, who spoke on behalf of God, who shared God’s laws and commands with the people. Most of the books of the prophets in the Old Testament, books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc, are about prophets who spoke for God during the time of the Kings of Israel (roughly 800-500 BC). These prophets sometimes spoke words of judgment and punishment – directly at the King, or to the people, or sometimes to a foreign nation. And sometimes they spoke words of hope and encouragement.

Four things to remember when reading prophets:

1. the prophets were primarily interested in changing the present, not predicting the future.

Because we have the objectivity of centuries of time and we have the ability to see how Jesus fulfilled the sayings of the prophets in amazing ways, we sometimes get hung up on the long-range view that the prophets were looking centuries ahead. They weren’t. Sometimes their words were fulfilled centuries later in profound ways because God did something like send his Son into the world! But the prophets were talking about things that were just about to happen...they could see the trends and figure out what disasters were looming unless the people changed! Unless they repented and returned to God.

So when we hear words of judgment and doom from the prophets, they are saying, “repent” or change and return to God and it might not be too late to avoid this calamity. They were most interested in changing the present.

2. The prophets always rooted for the underdog.

We talked about the characteristic of God that looks upon the marginalized and downtrodden and sick with love and compassion in the message series called the “Ripple Effect”. So if you want to look more closely at this, you can go to our message archives on the church website (spwired.com) and read or watch those messages there. The prophets, who were the mouthpieces for God, spoke passionately about God’s compassion for the poor, the oppressed, those with no voice, helpless. You will find this theme throughout the books of the Bible that bear a prophet’s name. If you are not among the poor or oppressed, then this message could be annoying or irritating. The Kings and priests were often infuriated at the prophets because of this part of their message and so many prophets were arrested or even killed.

3. The prophets spoke against two primary sins. These two primary sins that occupy the bulk of the prophets attention correlate perfectly with what Jesus would call the great commandments; to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength AND to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Idolatry - Idolatry is when we choose to love something else above God. It’s when we place our trust and our hope in something other than God, making that thing the object of our worship. And the prophets would illustrate how God feels when his people choose other gods. And how this angers and hurts God. And how God desires to be at the center of their hearts, in the center of their lives, and be the object of their worship.

Injustice – The Hebrew words “mishpat” and “sedekah” are used over 1000 times in the Old Testament. They are by far the most repeated words. They are often used together and they mean “mercy, compassion, justice, righteousness”. They mean “to do the right things for the right reasons”. This is about how we live out God’s love in the world. Again, we went through issues of injustice in our world and ways that we can respond in our recent series, “The Ripple Effect”, and I would encourage you to check out those messages because this is a major character trait of God. You will see this theme over and over when you read the prophets.

4. When the warnings failed and Israel found itself in despair and darkness, the message of the prophets turns to powerful messages of hope.

The messages of hope that God wanted the people of Israel to hear in the Old Testament (even after they blew it) are the same messages God wants us to hear in the life and teachings of Jesus and through the good news proclaimed by Paul! The Gift of Hope is that even when it seems like there is no way out, God’s love produces a hope in us with the power to lift us up out of our despair and shine light into our darkness. This hope activates God’s vision of new possibilities in our lives, even when that might seem ludicrous.

This hope is ours no matter (where we’ve been or)what we’ve done!

The prophet Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet. Most of the messages Jeremiah delivered for God were the warnings that annoyed or infuriated people. His messages were filled with impending doom that were the natural consequence of the people turning away from God, rejecting God and worshipping false gods, ignoring God’s commandments, refusing to listen to God’s warnings. Really, there wasn’t much more that the leaders and people of Israel could have done to distance themselves from God. They couldn’t have pushed God further away. It would have been very difficult for them to disappoint God any more than they already had.

And maybe that’s where you are today, or where you have been at some point in your life. You pushed God away or you did things that made you think that God would never take you back. That’s where the people of Israel were, so listen to what God has to say to them through the “bad news” prophet, Jeremiah.

We’re looking at Jeremiah 29:11-14. At this point, the Babylonian army had crushed Jerusalem and left it in rubble. Israel no longer existed as a country, only a remnant of people who had been exiled to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who escaped either death or exile and he writes a letter to all the elders and priests and prophets among the exiles in Babylon. These are the same leaders who misled the people and abandoned God; the same people who called for Jeremiah’s head. The same people who had been worshipping false gods, failing to follow God’s commandments. Listen to God’s message...

For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 TNIV

These are some amazing words when you think about it! God is saying, “I have not forgotten you. I will always love you. I will lift you up out of this misery. I will redeem and restore you. I have a future filled with hope in store for you!” The Gift of Hope is that God loves us no matter what we’ve done. No matter where we’ve been or what we’ve done, God will take us back! That is powerful hope!

Over the years, several people have said to me that they don’t understand how God could ever forgive them for something they did, they did something in their past that they deeply regret. It’s their secret and they rarely tell me what it is. They don’t want to say it out loud, because to them it is unforgivable. So there is this roadblock; they know they don’t deserve mercy and forgiveness and so they can’t imagine anyone, even God, being capable of forgiving them. And I usually respond in with the same type of illustration. Do you have

children? Could you ever imagine not being able to forgive your child for something they did, even if they did whatever it is that you did? Well, your heavenly Father loves you beyond your ability to love your children, so don't you think he wants to forgive you and restore you?

We find this very same theme in a parable that Jesus told to describe what God's love is like. He told a story about a young man who disowned his father and went to another country and foolishly spent all his money on a lifestyle that did not honor his father. When his money ran out, he became so desperate that he took a job of feeding pigs. He was so destitute that the pig's food looked good to him. Knowing that since he had disowned his father, he could only return as a servant, he still decided he'd be better off at his father's house. We could see this scenario playing out like this; the son grovels on his knees before his father, who might reject his son who had previously rejected him, or who might delight in humiliating his son before either kicking him back out to the road or reluctantly agreeing to let the son repay him by working for him for the rest of his life.

But that's not how the story goes. Jesus is telling us that this is what God is like. In the story Jesus tells, the father is out by the road looking for the son to come home, and when he sees him he runs out to meet him and welcomes him and kisses him and celebrates saying, "My son was lost and now he is found; he was dead, and now he is alive!"

The son had created a hopeless situation. He could never undo the damage. But the father loved him anyway, no matter what his son had done. This is a powerful message of hope for all of us. There is hope, no matter where you've been or what you've done. You may be dwelling in the darkness thinking that God could never forgive you, it's hopeless! But the truth is God loves you and will always welcome you back! This is part of the gift of hope that we celebrate in the coming of Jesus...that the darkness of our sin, brokenness that comes as a result of our choices and words and actions is not permanent state of being...despair does not get the last word! Hope comes to us, no matter where we've been or what we've done, through the love of Jesus.

Another part of the gift of hope in the message of the prophets is that **We have hope, no matter what obstacles we face!** Really, this message is not confined to the prophets. In the Old Testament, the message of hope in the face of overwhelming obstacles goes way back to the Exodus, when God called Moses to face off with the most powerful king in the world to lead powerless slaves to freedom. But the prophets used powerful images to remind God's people to hold onto hope, especially when it seemed hopeless. One of those powerful images comes from Isaiah 40. The setting is exactly the same as the one for Jeremiah 29. The remnant of Israel is in exile in Babylon, held in captivity, and deeply in despair. This was a time of spiritual crisis for them. Psalm 137 gives us a clue to the darkness they were in;

***By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,***

***our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in
a foreign land?***

Psalm 137:1-4 TNIV

This is their darkness. The people are losing hope because their nation no longer exists and they are in captivity, and their God seems to have abandoned them. Their home, their hope is 1000 miles away and they see no end to their captivity. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you too have felt that the world around you is crumbling and you can't find your footing, that you are powerless to do anything but endure it – there's no way out, and you wonder where God is...why does God seem so absent?

It's into those kinds of questions, in the face of deep despair and seemingly insurmountable obstacles that God's message comes to Isaiah;

**Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.**

**make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

Isaiah 40:1-5 TNIV

**A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare the way for the
LORD;**

I think the best way for you to see the powerful image of hope in this passage is for us to physically see it! This is a geographical image, so let's take a look at the map. So the exiles are over here in Babylon. Their

home, and the center of their cultural and religious life is here in Jerusalem. That's a 1000 mile journey and the roads went along the fertile crescent. It's actually only a 500 mile journey as the crow flies, but there are no roads. This area in between is mountainous desert, with deep ravines, and narrow, treacherous, rocky trails.

As the Israelites sat in Babylon they could not see a way home. What they did see were the obstacles; *captivity* – they were not free to return; *and a long, expensive, exhausting and dangerous journey*. What God wants them to see is that God is the God who can overcome these obstacles and God is going to restore them. God is going to help them rise above the darkness and God will bring them home.

God is not going to literally build a road through this desert, but God is knock down the obstacles and make a way, even when all the paths look like dead ends! And sure enough, within 70 years of the fall of Jerusalem and their captivity, the most powerful empire in the world, the Babylonian empire, is overrun by the Persian empire and the people of Israel are released to return home. A few years later, Artaxerxes, a new king of the Persians, begins assisting the return of the Israelites. God made a way when all the paths looked like dead ends.

That is part of the Gift of Hope. The reality of despair and darkness and insurmountable obstacles is overturned by the hopeful promise of a powerful God. And Jesus, whose coming we anticipate and prepare for in this season of advent, is the hopeful promise made flesh. The message of hope that overcomes the darkest despair and insurmountable obstacles is coming into the world as God puts on flesh and walks with us.

Maybe in your own way, you have sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept. Maybe you are there now. You face overwhelming obstacles and you cannot see a way out...only dead ends. You are not alone. The exiles of Babylon know your despair. The early Christians, who were being persecuted, also knew your despair. In Romans 5, Paul addresses the church in Rome and reminds of the gift of hope; that God's anointed son came into the world to shine light into our darkness and that in him we share in the boundless hope that even overcomes the dead end of all dead ends - death.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 5:1-4 NIV

Paul is reminding the church that we are never without hope, no matter what we face; these people were facing persecution...prison, beatings, death. They were being hunted by the most powerful force in the world. They didn't see many options...there was no way out for them. Paul is reminding them that they have a hope that overcomes whatever they may face....whatever we may face....persecution, hardship, grief-pain, betrayal, divorce, sickness, even death (as Paul himself was facing), we are never without hope because Christ is always with us! He was the one sent into this world to overcome the insurmountable obstacles of sin and death and share with us the boundless hope of God's love and resurrection life. So no matter what we face, we face it with Christ. This is God's promise!

This week marks the 11th anniversary of the day my mother defeated death and entered into the fullness of life. She battled a brain cancer for two years. Even though she faced the insurmountable obstacle of death, she never lost hope. Her hope went beyond a desire for the cancer to disappear. Her hope was that her faith would outshine the darkness of her disease. Even in her weakness and sickness she wanted people to see her hope, that in the end she would not be defeated by the dead end of terminal cancer, but that she would overcome even that obstacle because God sent his son into this world to make a path..to build a road that would lead her out of that darkness and into the light of his love. Jesus brought her that hope! His presence in her life gave her an ability to see beyond the obstacles and live in power and grace in spite of the reality of her health.

This is the gift of hope we celebrate today. It comes to us through his son, the messiah, who arrival we anticipate in this season. It's based not on wishes or dreams but on the love of God and his promise that we share in resurrection life with him. It is the gift of hope that even when it seems like there is no way out, God's love produces a hope in us with the power to lift us up out of our despair and shine light into our darkness. It's the hope that God loves us no matter where we've been or what we've done! And it's the hope that God never abandons us, no matter what we face! That's good news!