

“Christmas Unwrapped--Hope”

[VIDEO OPENER] Last week we started this message series called “Christmas Unwrapped.” And I dedicated this to a friend of mine who’s become completely disenchanted with Christmas. Can’t wait to get it over with every year. He’s not a grinch. He keeps his dislike of Christmas to himself. But it has just lost its meaning for him, just like it has for so many of us. One of the problems is that we compare Christmas as adults to the joy we had as kids. Now the innocence is lost and for some people, like my friend, all that’s left is the busyness, the materialism, the entitlement mentality.

So my prayer for all of us adults is that we are surprised by God this Advent season as we get closer to Christmas. That we find God’s real gifts at Christmas and that we unwrap them.

I’m keeping this popcorn tin up here through this series. This was giving to me as a gift in 1991 and I never unwrapped it, never opened it, never enjoyed it and I missed out. It will always remind me that God gives us some amazing gifts when he is born to us, when he takes on human flesh as Jesus and becomes one of us, but we’ve got to unwrap these gifts. We’ve got to open them up so we can enjoy them, be nourished by them. Last week we looked at the gift of strength and this week we’re going to unwrap the gift of hope.

One of our traditions during Advent is that we try to always watch the classic movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. There’s a line in the movie that’s real important, but it happens early on and it’s easy to miss. Clarence, the angel second class is about to get this assignment to go out and help this guy who’s in trouble. The superior says, “You’ve got to go help this guy George Bailey.” And Clarence says, “What is it? Is he sick?” And I love the response that he gets. “No it’s worse than that. He’s discouraged.” That’s an important line because discouragement – the lack of hope – can be worse than any physical illness.

The human spirit needs hope to survive and to thrive. Viktor Frankl was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau. He wrote that you couldn’t tell who would survive the brutal conditions, the torture, the starvation, the lice, the rats, the slave labor just by looking at people. It wasn’t the physically strong that survived. Frankl found that those who survived had things yet to do in their lives. They had hope.

One expert said, “Since my early years as a physician I learned that taking away hope is for most people like pronouncing a death sentence. Their already hard-pressed will to live can become paralyzed and they may give up and die.”

The writers of the Bible recognized this more than 2500 years ago. King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 13:12 **[SLIDE...]** **“Hope deferred makes the heart sick but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12).** One translator paraphrased it this way, **[SLIDE...]** **“When hope is crushed the heart is crushed.”**

It’s not surprising that if God created human beings with this craving for hope it would make sense that he would also serve as our ultimate hope. In fact, in Romans 15:13 it describes God as the God of hope. there are 95 references to hope in the Old Testament. There are another 85 references in the New Testament. This theme of hope is woven all throughout scripture and it’s going to be our theme today.

It’s a very timely topic. George Gallup the public opinion pollster said, “People in many nations seem to be searching with new intensity for spiritual moorings these days. Why is that? One of the key factors prompting this search is a need for hope in these troubled times.” The point I want to make today is that the God of the Bible is that source of hope. God offers a hope that is so powerful that it can transform a human being’s life and it can rewrite a person’s eternity. And one of the reasons that God took on human form, that Jesus was born, was to give humanity hope, life-sustaining hope.

Let’s take a minute to clarify something. The kind of hope we’re talking about is not the kind of hope that we normally think of when we use the word hope. In everyday conversation we use the word “hope” in various different ways that aren’t really consistent to what the Bible refers to when it’s talking about hope. For instance sometimes we talk about hope and what we really mean is wishful thinking. **[SLIDE: “Poor substitutes for hope: 1. Wishful thinking.”]** Wishful thinking is when we try to hope things in or out of existence.

We blow out the candles on our birthday cake and say, "I hope I have another year of health and happiness." Or we pick up the *Wall Street Journal* and say, "I hope my dot.com stock has gone up again." Or we turn on the TV and say, "I hope the Chiefs beat the Ravens today."

Wishful thinking is that kind of hopeful feeling that somehow, some way, things are going to go the way we want them to even though we don't have any power to make it happen. Sometimes when we engage in wishful thinking, we can actually convince ourselves of something even when something isn't true. That's the power of wishful thinking, but it's not real hope.

I can wish that my hair would start growing back in on it's own. But it ain't gonna happen. That's not real hope.

So let's not confuse real hope with wishful thinking. And let's not confuse real hope with blind optimism. **[SLIDE: add to previous, "2. Blind optimism."]** I think it's great to be an optimistic person. I tend to be an optimistic person but some optimists see everything through rose colored glasses. Everything. They paper over their problems as if they didn't exist. They avert their eyes from the ugliness of the world. To them everything is just fine all the time. Sort of like the sign on the bulletin board at the grocery store. "Lost Dog: Has three legs, blind in left eye, missing right ear, tail broken and recently castrated. Answers to the name Lucky." You can call that dog Lucky all you want. That is not a lucky dog! And sometimes people in their blind optimism will pretend things are great when they're not. Blind optimism is not real hope.

Now let me contrast wishful thinking and blind optimism with biblical hope. For most people hoping is something that they do. But the Bible talks about hope as something we can have. See the difference? Hope is something you can have. You can possess it. You can own it. You can grab a hold of it. For someone who follows Jesus Christ here is the definition of hope: **[SLIDE...]** **Hope is the confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill the promises that he has made to you.** This is one of the great gifts of Christmas. God took on human form as a baby, as Jesus. Jesus grew and lived and taught, and turned the world upside down! And then he was killed on a cross and came back from the dead. It's easy to forget about the crucifixion and resurrection around Christmas. Our tendency is to want to focus on baby Jesus, on shepherds, and angels, and wise men, and sweet Mary, and humble Joseph. But the manger is always in the shadow of the cross. There is no celebration of Christmas without Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. That's why we don't take the big wooden cross out of here, it stands there near the Christmas tree, near the nativity scene. It reminds us that the baby was born to die, to pay the price for my sin and yours. And then Jesus came back from death to give us hope.

The Bible refers to this as living hope because it is always directly linked to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:4 **[SLIDE...]** **"In (God's) great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4).** Through his resurrection, Jesus Christ demonstrated once and for all beyond any doubt that he is God and that he really does possess the power to fulfill the promises that he makes to us. Promises that he'll change our lives, promises that he'll guide us, promises that he will walk side by side with us through the turbulence of life, promises that he can cause good to emerge from the personal problems that we face, promises that he will grant us eternal life in heaven with him. The resurrection is an actual physical event in history that sealed Christ's identity as being the God who loves us and who is committed to helping us.

Now let's talk about three particular areas where Christians draw hope from Christ. Why this is one of the greatest gifts of Christmas. First **[SLIDE...]** **We have hope because our past is forgiven.** Jesus was born to die because I need forgiveness and you need forgiveness.

Lamentations 3:21 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"This I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning" (Lamentations 3:21).** What the writer is saying there is we can live with hope as followers of Jesus Christ because even though we may fail God (which we all do) and even though we may fail our children in some way (which we all do) and even though we may fail our spouse in some way (which we all do) even so God's

compassion, his forgiveness for those wrongs we've done in our past is a renewable resource. It never is exhausted. It is fresh and it is available every single day.

Do you remember when you were a kid and you'd be playing baseball, or kickball, or a game, or just acting something out, pretending. If you messed up do you remember what you'd yell? "Do over! It's a do a do-over!" It's one of the great rules of kid-dom. The do-over.

Jesus Christ is in the Do Over business. If he had a business card it'd say, "Jesus Christ - Do Overs". That's his job, that's his ministry, that's his mission to give Do Over's to people like us. He's saying, "I will forgive you. I will absolve you of your past because my compassions are new every morning. They never fail."

There's another passage in the Old Testament that talks about Jesus. It says this: **[SLIDE...]** **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isaiah, 53:5, NIV).** There's the do over. It doesn't cost us anything, but it cost him a lot.

Some people need a Do Over from God because of shame. Like you squeeze the toothpaste out of the tube, shame has just squeezed hope out of your life. Over the years I've had many people come to me crushed with shame. They've done some dirty deeds in business, or been unfaithful to their spouse, or broken a trust so badly, or had an abortion, or wounded someone in a way that they can't take back. And they feel such crushing shame.

One of the most awesome gifts that God is giving to us in being born to us is the gift of a Do Over? If you feel weighed down by shame in your life over something – the way that you treated your kids as they were growing up, a marriage that fell apart, whatever it is, why would you want to lug this backpack of shame any longer when God is saying, *"My mercies are fresh everyday."* 1 John 1:9 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NIV).** All we have to do is ask for this forgiveness. The question is, are you going to ask?

We don't have to be crushed, we are people of hope, because Jesus was born to us, to forgive us, and so we have hope!

Another facet of this hope that is the gift to us at Christmas is that **[SLIDE: add to previous, "Our future has purpose."]** our future has purpose. The passage I read last week as I pointed out the Advent Wreath points this out. It comes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. **[SLIDE...]** **"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).**

A life without purpose is a life of darkness. Maybe you know what I'm talking about. It's a life of groping to find meaning. It was into a dark world that Jesus was born, that God took on human flesh, so that you and I could know that our lives do have meaning and purpose. God has put you on this earth, and wired you up uniquely to do some things. There are several people at the Salvage Yard who know that God put them here to help lead people out of the darkness of addiction and into the light of life.

I know that my purpose is to be a mirror, to reflect the light of God into the lives of as many people as possible. To offer hope, and healing, and joy, and peace, and strength. Paul wrote this, **[SLIDE...]** **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV).** You have hope because you have a purpose. You were created specifically, and God has certain things that only you can do. Instead of feeling a lack of purpose, strive to figure what God put you here to do, and then do it. Because you have purpose, you have hope.

And by the way, you're never too old to discover your purpose. Every once in a while somebody will say to me, "I'm too old for God to do anything with, I've wasted so many years going in the wrong direction, there's not much God could do with me." To that God says, "Are you kidding me! As long as you have breath, you have purpose!" God said to his people through the prophet Joel, **[SLIDE...]** **"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten..." (Joel 2:25, NIV).** In other words, if you think that something, some sin, some poor choices, years of heading the wrong direction have made you somehow purposeless, think again. When you choose to follow Christ those years are restored.

Because of the birth of Jesus, your future, my future, no matter how long or short, has purpose. So we have hope.

Another facet of this hope that is the gift to us at Christmas is that **[SLIDE: add to previous, “Our deaths are not final.”]** Our deaths are not final. Listen to this: One out of every six Americans believe there is nothing after this life. One out of every six say, “There’s nothing after I die. This is it. You are snuffed out. There is no existence beyond this. When you die everything you have, everything you are is buried in a casket and that’s it.” You want a prescription for hopelessness? For despair? No wonder we have hopelessness in this land. The hopelessness is so black that people can’t face it.

So some people go to wishful thinking and they say, “Maybe I’ll be reincarnated or something.” Or some people engage in blind optimism and say, “I just won’t think about it. Maybe by the time I get sick and I’m ready to die they’ll find some cure for whatever it is I have.”

Those defense mechanisms can make people feel all right for a while. But there is one really, really ugly statistic in this world and that is - death plays a perfect game. One out of one dies. One hundred percent. One out of one dies. And the tricky thing about death is sometimes we don’t see it coming. We just don’t see it coming.

A few years back I did a funeral for a man who was 24 years old. Left behind a wife and kids. Massive heart attack.

Any time we get in a car, or cross a street. Someone reminded me a couple weeks ago about the pastor who was electrocuted as he got ready to baptize someone. We just don’t know.

How we face death says a whole lot about how we face life. When you are assured of a future in eternity with God then you have a sense of confidence and boldness and courage in this world. It turns us from hopelessness to hope. One man who survived a fiery plane crash of a DC10 in 1989 said, “I’ll tell you the truth. It was very scary. But at the time I felt like I was full of hope. I really had hope that if I were to die at that moment I would be in heaven with God forever. I really had hope that if I died at that moment God would care for my family. It’s like it says in Psalms... ‘What can anybody do to you if your hope is in the Lord.’” We have a confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill every promise he’s made to us. That changes everything. That changes your perspective. Even in ways that are hard to understand.

Hebrews 6:19 says, **[SLIDE...]** **“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19).** Our hope is only as good as what it is attached to, as what it is anchored to. Hope in and of itself has no power. You can wish for something, you can hope for something, you might feel a little better about it. We might fool ourselves into thinking everything’s ok. But the only way hope has any real power is when it’s anchored in the God who has real power. And not only real power but a real desire out of his love for you to help you. Those who follow Jesus Christ hope in the confident expectation that God is willing and able to fulfill the promises he’s made to them.

Hope is one of the greatest gifts of Christmas. Jesus came so you and I could have life sustaining hope. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer, include time of commitment...

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