

*Sermon: Hope's Light is Shining*  
*Text: Isaiah 9:2 – 7*  
*Date: Nov. 29, 2009 – Advent 1*  
*Place: Jesup First UMC*

A group of scientists wanted to test the affect that hope has on people in the midst of trying times. So, they conducted an experiment using lab rats. They separated the rats into two groups. Both groups were placed in water and made to swim around and around with no way to climb out. But every now and then, they would reach down and pick up the rats in one group and hold them out of the water for 30 seconds before putting them back into the water. And something amazing happened: the rats in the group that were left to swim died within a few hours, but the rats that were lifted out of the water from time to time kept swimming and swimming, because they were anticipating the next moment of relief.

Philip Brooks was an Episcopal Priest, serving in Boston. He was exhausted and on the verge of a complete breakdown when his friends and family convinced him to take some time off. And so, he took a trip to the mountains and one night, up on a hillside overlooking a small town below, he experienced a spiritual renewal, and afterwards, he sat down and wrote these lyrics:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Years ago, a submarine went down off the coast of Massachusetts. The Navy reached quickly, but time was running out. And then, a team of divers went down, and

then they got close to the hull of the sub, they heard tapping from inside. It was Morse Code; it simply asked: *“Is there any hope?”*

Is there any hope? That’s what a lot of people are asking this morning. Is there any hope that I can find a job? Is there any hope that I can save my marriage? Is there any hope that my children will stay out of trouble? Is there any hope that the cancer will go into remission? Is there any hope? Is there any hope?

The prophet Isaiah ministered during some of the darkest days in Israel’s history. There was great political turmoil. The people lived in constant fear; new political alliances threatened to wipe Israel off the map; and Israel was caught in the middle of two super powers, Assyria and Egypt, and the constant pull was tearing Israel apart. It was a time of great uncertainty. And there stood Isaiah, God’s man in the midst of the trial; and he warned the kings of Judah and the people but ... nobody listened. And so, he delivered God’s message of judgment: *“Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloh and rejoices over Rezen and the son of Remaliah, therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the river ... distressed and hungry, they will roam the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and will curse their king and their God ... and they will be thrust into utter darkness.”*<sup>i</sup>

Isaiah seems to be saying, *“It’s all over. We’re toast.”* And then, suddenly a ray of hope: *“But there will be no more gloom ... 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 ... For unto us a child is born, to*

*us a son is given and the government will be upon His shoulders and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Hope! Now, that's a word we use a lot, isn't it? We say: "I hope the Falcons win the Super Bowl this year." Or "I hope it snows this Christmas." But what is hope? You see, the way we use the word, "hope" carries a lot of uncertainty. We really aren't sure it's going to happen, but we want it to happen really bad; so, we say, "I hope ...". But the way the Bible uses the word is totally different. Hope is not an uncertainty; no, hope is something very definite. It is the assurance that something is going to happen because God said it was going to happen. And all I have to do is: wait and believe; wait and trust in God.

Now, today is the First Sunday of Advent, the time in the Christian year when the church looks back at the first Advent of Jesus as Bethlehem's Babe and looks forward to His Second Advent with great anticipation. It is a season of hope, not wishful thinking, not uncertain possibilities, but confident assurance that the One who came and lived among us, the One who suffered, died, and rose again, the One who ascended into heaven will come again to judge the quick and the dead. This is our hope!

And in spite of the darkness of our world, in spite of the sin and sickness, in spite of the economy and the \_\_\_\_\_, hope's light is shining this morning.

***First, hope's light calls us to look forward with expectation.*** At the end of the First Century, the

churches of Asia Minor were in tremendous turmoil. And in the midst of their struggle, God gave a series of visions to the Apostle John; and in these visions, John's eyes are lifted beyond the present pain and hardship and he catches a glimpse of eternity. Listen again to how John responds to these visions: "*The One who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'*" And John responds: "*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*"

But we're almost tempted to give up. One day, Bill Hybels walked into his church after a Baptismal Service and found a woman in the stairwell, crying. So, he asked her if everything was okay and she said: "*My mama was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. After 5 years, I thought God wasn't listening. After 10 years, I thought I was wasting my breath. After 15 years, I thought I was being absurd. I felt so foolish, but I kept praying. And today, she was baptized. Pastor, I'll never doubt the power of God again.*"

That's what hope does; it keeps looking forward to something even when everything tells you to give up.

***Second, hope's light tells me God is still working.*** Isaiah reminded Israel that although their world was crashing in around them, although war seemed inevitable, God had not forgotten them. Israel's hope was a new prince to sit upon the throne and "*He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" For Isaiah that new prince was Hezekiah, Israel's righteous king, but the Apostle's picked up on Isaiah's prophesy and saw in it the foretelling of the birth of Jesus.

And certainly, you and I can see this as a foreshadowing of His Second Coming. You see, friends, your finances may be weak; your schedule may be overloaded; your job may be a mess; your marriage may be on the rocks; your health may be failing, but **“I am confident that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.”** Through it all, God is saying: *“Don’t give up no matter how bad it gets, no matter how hopeless it may seem; I’m still working in your life.”*

***Third, hope’s light frees me from trying to make things happen.*** On our high school football team, we had an Offensive Tackle named Jimmy Holton. Jimmy went on to play three years in Athens. Now, if it was 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2 or 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3, Jimmy was the type guy who would look at the team in the huddle and say, *“Okay guys, follow me.”* That’s the kind of attitude coaches love; that’s the kind of attitude we really admire. We all want to be able to take the whole team – the whole church, the whole family – on our shoulders and say, *“Okay guys, follow me.”*

But man, that’s really tiring ... and you know, it just doesn’t work. I’ve come to realize that Tucker is not the hope of glory, but *“Christ in me”* is. I’ve come to realize **“It’s not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.”** Verse 7 says: **“The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies will make this happen.”** And that takes the burden off of me to try to make it all happen by myself.

***Fourth, hope’s light forces me to be honest about my walk.*** The question is: do I really trust God?

I say I do and I know that's what I'm supposed to do, but do I really trust God? Is my faith as strong as it should be?

No one would seriously deny that Isaiah was a man of great faith. When God gave him this message of hope, Isaiah believed God. Even when things got tough, he believed God. Even when it seemed like he was all alone, he believed God. Even when people ridiculed him and mocked him and rejected his message, Isaiah hoped in God. He said: "*Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint.*"

Hope's light helps me be honest about my walk with the Lord.

A man took his granddaughter to see the live nativity scene at the church and she was fascinated. She just couldn't take it all in – the manger, the shepherds, the wise men, the animals. Then, she saw the star and grandpa asked: "*Honey, do you think that star is bright enough to light up the whole stable?*" She said: "*Oh yes sir, but grandpa you can't see how bright the light is, unless you get down here and look up.*"

Oh brothers and sisters, the light of hope is shining in our world today. We just need to put ourselves in the right place so we can see it.

Shine, Jesus shine fill this land with the Father's glory  
Blaze, Spirit blaze set our hearts on fire.  
Flow, River flow and flood the nations with grace and mercy  
Send forth your Word; Lord and let there be light.

