

HOPE

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Now Advent is a time where we prepare our hearts, minds, and souls for the celebration of the birth of Christ, and every week we start adding more and more of our favorite Christmas songs during worship.

For many of us during Advent, we attend church a little more often, or we may listen a little closer to some of the religious Christmas Carols, or maybe we even put up a nativity scene in our homes. I even know of some families that do daily Advent meditations.

Now these are some of the ways some people prepare for Christmas, but not really the way the majority of our society prepares, is it? Christmas coming up means that we have to buy gifts, we have to get a picture of our kids or grandkids sitting on Santa's lap.

We have to cook the Christmas turkey, we have to put lights up on our homes, the Christmas tree has to be bought, the house has to get decorated, the carpeting has to be cleaned... it just sounds like a lot of work.

For most of us we have to be part of the craziness. We still have to go out there and find a place to park, keep from freezing to death in the cold rain, find the store we are looking for, elbow ourselves past the people in our way, stand in line to pay for the item, and then try to find our car in the parking lot, fight the traffic and go home.

That is just the way it is. For many of us, that has become part of our lives. But I think it is important for us to slow down a little and remember the purpose of the season.

Over the next 4 weeks we will be talking about 4 different themes. Today is Hope, then we will have Peace, Joy and then Love. Some churches change the order a little, but it isn't the order that is important.

What is important is that every week we focus on a theme that helps us see Christ as more than a little baby in a manger – hopefully we will all see him as a redeemer and a true savior.

So I invite all of us to come every week until Christmas as we journey down a path and prepare our hearts together to receive Christ this year.

In the first scripture that Noel read for us, the prophet Isaiah was writing to the Hebrews about a message from God. During this time there were a lot of wars going on. They didn't know from one year to the next if an invading army was going to take them over, if they were going to be exiled or worse. It was a time of great worries.

Then through a prophesy, Isaiah tells them of a time that is coming where a great one will come, and he will be the judge between nations and there won't be any more weapons and there won't be any more wars, nor will anyone even learn how to fight anymore.

For a country under attack or the threat of attack, this is great news. A time will come that there won't be any more wars.

How does that make us feel today? Knowing that a day will come where nation will not rise up against nation. No more wars. Wars have become so commonplace that it has been at least a month since I have heard anything about Afghanistan. What about Darfur? I haven't heard anything about Darfur for months either.

Does that mean the wars have ended? Not at all. It is just that we are living in a time with wars happening in so many places, that the day to day battles are no longer newsworthy.

Do you ever wonder what is going on with this world we live in? Yesterday the US just stated that they found evidence that North Korea purchased equipment to enrich uranium – a key step in making a nuclear bomb.

Friday, Iran made a statement that said further discussion of their nuclear program was unnecessary and previous talks are now irrelevant.

So we may be hearing less of wars that are currently going on, but we start hearing about more threats of war happening in other places – and for the sake of this message, it doesn't matter if you believe we are the aggressors or the ones being threatened.

The point is that there are a lot of wars and rumors of war happening right now, today.

When I hear about all of this, especially when there is talk about nuclear weapons, I get a little scared. I don't know what is going on or what will happen in the next few years, and that scares me a little.

So when I look at scripture like Isaiah's prophecy, with the idea that someday there won't be any more war, I sometimes wish for that time to come now. A time where we no longer fight - human against human. A time when we can actually live in peace with one another.

Don't get me wrong, I am not coming out for or against the war with this talk, I am just looking for some peace on earth and good will towards each other.

Isaiah's prophecy gives me hope – hope of a world filled with peace, joy and love.

But when is that day coming? Nobody knows for sure. In the other passage that Noel read for us, Jesus tells us that he will return at an unexpected hour. What great hope that is for me, and should be for all of us, to know that Jesus will return.

Through all of the craziness happening in our lives, through all of the craziness happening in this world, through all of the death, destruction, hatred, and depression, we still have something to be hopeful for.

Through him we can have a new life – filled with hope, love, joy and peace. A life that will continue throughout the ages. Everlasting life in heaven.

I don't know what you think of when you think of heaven, but I used to think I would be flying high above the clouds with my harp in my hand, waving to the people I knew. Then, I remembered, I'm afraid of heights, and I didn't like that image of heaven.

I am not sure what heaven looks like, but luckily for us we don't have to wait until we die to see a little bit of heaven. Jesus tells us this life isn't lived in vain. I feel that if we believe in Christ, if we continue to learn about Him, and pray and meditate, we can start to feel some of his love right here, today, in our lives.

When I speak to some people and they tell how they enjoy helping others, I see the love of Christ. When I speak to others and I hear stories about children and grandbabies, I see the Joy of God, and when I speak to others that feel Christ working in their lives, I see a heavenly peace.

We don't have to die to get a look at heaven. That wouldn't be any fun. God wants us to get to know Him and have hope in Him.

Now we can have hope in many different things can't we? Hope that I'll win the Powerball, hope that gas prices won't go up any higher, hope the housing situation improves soon, hope I remember to set the VCR to tape my favorite shows, or maybe even hope that the Cubs will win the World Series during my lifetime.

I think I would rather place my hope in eternal life than any of those other things because God has made a promise to us – a new life with him; this should give us all hope.

There a hymn we sing occasionally that addresses where we should place our hope. I would like to ask Jessica to sing verses 1 and 4 for us.

Well placed hope is good -- but we can't be discouraged if we lose hope from time to time. After the last supper, when Jesus was taken to be crucified, the Apostles lost Hope. They thought Jesus had come to redeem them, to save them, how could he be taken and crucified?

But what they later found out, and what we know today, that by Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead, he defeated death, he defeated sin, and he did this for us, so we can have eternal life.

Christ died and rose again giving us hope and forgiveness by his sacrifice. We remember that sacrifice through Holy Communion.

Here at Sanctuary, we believe Christ invites everyone to Him who is ready to begin or continue their faith journey. Once we believe in Christ our Journey isn't over, it is only beginning.

Receiving Holy Communion is a way for us to outwardly show our hope in Christ and accept Him into our lives for the first time or the hundredth time. If we've lost our way on the journey, let's ask Christ for forgiveness and let's get back on the right path.

If we haven't started our journey with Christ, let's open our hearts and ask him to show us the way. Because with Christ, we can see the love of heaven today.

And for those of us who aren't lost, or who aren't beginning a journey, let's open our minds in a new way and let's grow in our love for Him and for those around us.

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