

## CHRISTMAS HOPE IN A HOPELESS WORLD

### Hope vs. Despair

Isaiah 2:1-5

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**LISTEN:** <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/christmas-hope-in-a-hopeless-world-hope-vs-despair/>

Despair and hopeless have many faces. This picture of my grandson, Sebastian, says it all. We could do multiple choice: His girlfriend just broke up with him? He didn't like the election outcome? He just received his county property tax bill? His diaper is wet? On a more serious note, we can all, we can all relate. Hopelessness comes when we can't see any light at the end of the tunnel, no hope of things changing, no way out. That's a scary place.

I think this sense of despair, of unease, of vague anxiety has permeated our land. I participated in a recent webinar with Adam Hamilton, pastor of The Church of the Resurrection in the Kansas City area. He made the statement that there are two groups of people who are great at generating fear: Politicians and preachers! And that got me thinking. Shouldn't we be people of hope, not people inciting fear? Shouldn't we be sharing God's hope?

Well, the prophet Isaiah preached in a difficult national and political climate as well. He preached in a time of national decline. His people had started depending upon their own power; they had turned their religion into lip service without obedience. And he saw how afraid and hopeless they were. He was doing what we should do this season, as Jesus-followers--point people to something/Someone higher, bigger, more noble and holy. The God of universe, made known in Messiah, the Deliverer. Hope!

He prophesied that energies and resources once used to make war to kill will be used to build up life (v. 4b). And please note: war, hatred and bigotry are learned, they are not inborn. That will reverse someday.

Now I ask you: Was Isaiah being very realistic? Was he a fool? Did this come to pass in his day? No. Has it in ours? But we have a choice this Advent--whether to be people of hope or people of despair. This Isaiah passage opens with "the Word Isaiah saw" (v. 1). Will we let our lives be shaped by God's Word of hope, or by the human word of despair? Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's closest friend and biographer, in his last letter to Bonhoeffer in prison, wrote that "we are living in a great pause..." Yes. That's why we sing with great meaning and hope, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Krista Tippett writes how bewildering and distracting immediate history can be. We need to take the long haul into consideration, she says, [*Speaking of Faith*, p. 122]. Hope sees what is not yet and lives and loves as if it is already true.

How does this Advent hope touch us personally, **regarding brokenness and loss**? I have a pastor friend who years ago went through a painful divorce. He believed he would never pastor again, would never be able to live out his life calling. He was living in a very conservative region

of the U.S., where it would be tough to ever get a church to call him. In fact, when a church did call him, that church was kicked out of the local association. But his congregation thrived, because he was living transparently and broken before them. They began to see additions to their fellowship. I had the privilege of preaching several revival meetings there. One day he turned to me and said, "Please tell others: God not only forgives; God restores." There is hope. There is life again. So, I'm telling you!

What does this Advent hope mean **regarding the two existential "biggies"--suffering and death?** Marva Dawn is a prolific author and dynamic Christian. I had the privilege of meeting her once. All her life, she has been wracked with pain, disease and disability. She writes, "One of the biggest problems in dealing with the breakdown of my body is that I keep looking in the wrong direction. I look to the past and the capabilities I once had, instead of looking to the future and what I will someday become in the presence...of God" [*Being Well When We're Ill*, p. 231]

One of my mother's favorite Bible verses which she loved to quote was "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the hearts of man, what God has prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). C.S. Lewis put it this way: All of our best adventures in this life will be only the book cover and title page. In eternity, we will begin chapter one, and every chapter is better than the one before! [*The Reason for God*, by Timothy Keller, p. 226].

Hope! Now we don't experience hope by osmosis, by standing near the Candle of Hope, or by spouting some churchy words once a year at Christmastime. No. Hope is personal. It is all about a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ. As we confess our despair, our sin, and invite him in, he brings God and the Spirit with him. And hope blossoms. O come, O come, Emmanuel!