

Hope for the World: Hope in the Unexpected

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WATCH or LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/hope-in-the-unexpected/

We are called to look for God in unexpected places, at unexpected times.

[Read earlier in the service: Psalms 122]

1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" 2 Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. 3 Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together. 4 To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. 5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. 7 Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." 8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." 9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

Today we begin our last sermon series of the calendar year, but it's actually the first series of the Christian liturgical year. The liturgical calendar follows the life of Jesus, so it begins with this time when we look forward to Jesus' birth. From now until Christmas day, we'll focus on ADVENT – which is different from Christmas.

- Christmas is a specific event... a moment in time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.
- Advent is a season that is about getting ready; it's about anticipation. Advent leads us to Christmas Day.

During this sermon series, we're going to focus on HOPE. The hope that we can all look forward to in Jesus, and the hope that this world is so desperately in need of. Today's message is about "HOPE IN THE UNEXPECTED."

I couldn't help but think back to several unexpected things that my family has lived through over the years, and there are several different stories I could tell about that – but I'm just going to tell you one:

Years ago, when my oldest son – Josh – was in elementary school, his Aunt Sharon took him to Six Flags amusement park in St. Louis. I don't remember much about that day, except it was during the summer and it was hot. At some point during the day, Josh suggested that the two of them should stand on the bridge over one of the water rides, so that when the boat of people flew down the ramp and went under the bridge, then they'd be splashed by the water and get some relief from the heat. Sharon agreed to do that with her innocent, almost angelic nephew, so they both walked onto the middle of the bridge and waiting. After a few seconds, Josh suggested to his Aunt that it would "be more fun" if they closed their eyes – so they'd be surprised by the splash or something like that. So Sharon trustingly closed her eyes and waited. Just a moment later, the large splash came and the wave of water came slamming down on Sharon. But when she opened her eyes, Josh wasn't standing next to her like she expected. In his sneakiness, he quietly moved out of the splash zone after he asked Sharon to close her eyes, and he was standing off the side laughing at the prank he pulled on his Aunt, who was now soaked from head to toe while he was nice and dry. Sometimes unexpected situations don't turn out like we hope they would.

But we're going to do our best today to look for those unexpected events and situations that arise when God shows up and brings hope into our lives in ways that could be missed.

Our first passage of scripture this morning is...

Romans 13:11-14

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Some Bible's title this passage as "The Day is Near." It begins by painting a picture for us that the night is almost over, and the sunrise – which we are all looking forward to – is almost upon us. This perspective – the perspective of waiting for what is to come – goes perfectly with the season of Advent. And, as a sidenote, I think it goes perfectly with our pastor search process as well. The long wait is nearly over, but we're not quite there yet.

The Amplified Bible talks about the "night" in the passage being "this present evil age" that will soon be gone and replaced by Christ's glory/return. So as we wait, Paul wrote in verse 13 some reminders of how we are to live. In my paraphrase, keep living for God instead of living for yourself.

The Message paraphrase of this passage puts it this way: "The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed."

I like how that's written, because it leaves no doubt about who is at work: God. God is at work, preparing things for what is to come. God is getting things ready for our future with him.

But oftentimes this season of the year is difficult, and there are many reasons it's difficult.

- Some of us have lost loved ones, and when they're not there with us... at the dinner table, or in our pew on Christmas Eve, or opening presents with us at the tree – it's unbelievably hard. We shouldn't minimize that and there's no way around it. Loss is difficult.
- There is also the reality that life is just more stressful during this season. We often have more expenses with presents and travel and other purchase, which is tough to navigate. Also, just about everyone seems to be more on edge than normal... everyone is rushing and in more of a hurry than usual. I don't shop very often, but in the few times I've been in stores within the last couple of weeks, it was amazing to me just how "tense" everyone seemed to be. Instead of smiles of contentment and happiness, people were frowning as they rushed around. And that led to a disregard for those around them as several people pushed carts in front of others, cut people off, and just basically were rude.
- And there is also the spiritual difficulties that come with this season. As we wait and anticipate celebrating the birth of Jesus of Christmas day, we also must acknowledge that for centuries Christians just like us have been yearning and hoping for the return of Christ into this broken world. That his second coming would bring an end to the suffering and darkness that we live with, and that hope would be restored for good. But still we wait.

In a moment we're going to look at an Old Testament example of how God brought hope in an unexpected way, but first I want all of us to consider how God is inviting us to bring hope into this world during this season of Advent...

1. If you know someone who is mourning the loss of a loved one, reach out to them in the coming days. Talk with them; spend time with them; Let them know they're not alone and you're with them.

2. And when you're out and about in the stores and malls and wherever life takes you in the coming days, don't get sucked into the rudeness... to the self-centered disregard for others. Look for ways you can offer hope to the strangers you'll encounter. If you see someone who is especially in a rush, offer them your place in line. When you see someone who seems stressed out about the amount of their bill, see if there is a way you can help. When someone says something rude to you, respond by something like, "I know it's a stressful time. I'll pray that God's peace will be close to you."
3. And finally, spiritually, let us not give up in our hope that Jesus is returning... that he cares about us and this world more than we can comprehend. Perhaps one of the things that can help us – and others – in that way is to look forward to the Christmas Eve candlelight service... a time when we come together in a powerful way in a clear representation of the light that Jesus is in the world. Maybe you'll have the opportunity to invite someone to that service who needs to see that there's hope for them as well.

Those are some things that we can do in the coming days to help others find hope in unexpected ways. Here is one final story of finding hope in unexpected places... and how when God brings hope into our lives, we have the opportunity to share that hope with those around us...

1 Kings 17:1-16

1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

2 The word of the Lord came to him, saying, 3 "Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

5 So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. 7 But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9 "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."

12 But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." 13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.

14 For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth."

15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.