Hope: the Power to Persevere

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Isaiah 40:31

*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 be faint*.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday on which we focus on Hope. The Sundays follow a pattern: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, or Love then Joy. Some churches use the sequence of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace. There is no right or wrong way to celebrate these virtues of the Christ.

The word ‘advent’ means “coming” or “arrival”. The focus of the entire Advent season is to prepare us for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and the rebirthing of the Christ within our hearts. Advent is marked by an attitude of expectancy, preparation, longing, and anticipation. We yearn for the awareness of Christ to raise our hearts, and minds, and being beyond that of the world.

Advent is about being freed from the shackles of doubt, fear, hatred, superiority, envy, lust, intolerance, disrespect, bigotry, and all other temptations of the mind, body, and ego that the world enticingly waives in front of us.

Advent begins with our hope in the deliverance from our darkness by God, who hears our cries and provides the Light of the Christ.

Hope is the power that separates the survivor from the victim. As long as we can cling to hope, we can endure anything, recover from anything. Hope often lies dormant until we need it and call upon its power, and then it whispers to our hearts that we can persevere; we can bear the burden until the challenge has been met.

Hope is the belief that circumstances will change and get better. It is Hope that tells us, “This too shall pass.” Hope is not a wish or a frivolous reverie, but an actual belief, the knowledge that things will get better. Hope is the knowledge and unflagging belief that after a surgery the cancer will have been removed and the chemo therapy will be successful.

Hope is what taps on the mother’s heart that although she has lost her job another one – the right and perfect one – is just around the next corner as long as she keeps looking. Anyone who has survived an ordeal, and was at the last of their resources physically, mentally, and emotionally, will point to Hope as their champion for survival. Winston Churchill allegedly expressed it this way: “Never, never, never, never, never give up.” He never really said that. But is makes a nice point.

Martin Luther King Jr. did say, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

I read an article where a psychologist said that from every challenge and disaster the survivors can be placed in one of two categories: psychological victims and psychological survivors. The victims are passive, pessimistic, and look to the past for better times. Their cries are for someone to help them. Their grief turns to despair and they are consumed by their loss, refusing to help themselves.

The psychological survivors, as you can imagine, are just the opposite. They are active, positive, and look to the future for better times. They also grieve, but they persevere, continue to fight, and search for ways to help themselves.

The purpose of the Christ is profound, and one of the messages is to move from a victim mindset to a survivor mindset, and on to a ‘thriver’ mindset. To have hope is to empower ourselves with the qualities, abilities, and virtues to face the challenges of the world and emerge a survivor.

Here are some attributes that are important to expressing the Hope that is within us.

#1. We spoke about this last week: Gratitude. It is important to express thanks for what we have right now today in order to loosen up the calcified hope that lives within us. We cannot dwell upon the past and what we’ve lost in the past and remain hopeful. It is a daily focus: be grateful for what we have right now.

#2. We must have faith. Part of faith believes that there is something bigger and more important than us. Faith is the focus that gives us a reason to keep going. From a spiritual standpoint, it is God. Our faith in God will keep us moving forward. But the world can offer us reasons to have faith: it can be a child, a mission, a cause, a loved one.

Faith and Hope are similar, but differ. Faith serves our understanding; Hope, our will. Faith teaches, prescribes, and directs, whereas Hope stirs up the mind and inspires the heart so that we are emboldened, made courageous, and made to be longsuffering to endure adversity, and wait for the better to arrive.

When we have Faith in the Christ, we act wisely and justly from this knowledge. But the ego at times ambushes our Faith and we lose our focus on the Light. That is when Hope steps up and wrestles with the darkness that has assaulted out Faith. Always looking forward, Hope pulls us out of the darkness to be joined again by Faith. This victory results in Peace, and Joy, and Love – the other virtues of Advent.

#3. Another quality that aids in the arrival of Hope is Love. Ironically, Hope leans forward to Love, Joy, and Peace, while Love reaches out to Hope. When we are experiencing stressful times sometimes knowing that love exists is all it takes for Hope to appear. I know it is so with me. When I am having difficulties, if I can be around Mary, it makes things better.

#4 Vision, or imagination, are critical to expressing Hope.

Think about the people you love and those who love you – family and friends. Just envisioning, imagining, thinking about loving and being loved is often all it takes for darkness to dissipate.

Romans 8:24-25 teaches this: *For we were saved by hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance*.

Paul tells us that hope is to look at something we cannot see; in other words we are imagining it, seeing it with our hearts.

Studies are showing that hope can change the grip of poverty. Sir Fazle Abed, founder of the Bangladeshi Aid Group says this, “Poverty is not just poverty of money or income. We also see a poverty of self-esteem, hope, opportunity and freedom. People trapped in a cycle of destitution often don’t realize their lives can be changed for the better through their own activities. Once they understand that, it’s like a light gets turned on.”

In one effort, called the Graduation Project, impoverished people from six countries were given gifts of livestock, and they were inspired to work more hours. They took odd jobs and their savings rose. Their mental health improved. In a word, they developed Hope.

Esther Duflo, an economist at MIT, and co-author of the study, wrote, “The mental health part is absolutely critical. Poverty causes stress and depression and lack of hope, and stress and depression and lack of hope, in turn, cause poverty.”

Another study involving Ethiopians randomly being assigned to watch an hour long inspirational video resulted in them saving more and spending more for their children’s education. There is currently research underway to see if the exposure to religion might have a similar affect on personal economic situations.

The Heifer Project, to which we now contribute as a church,

is a Hope-building organization. This simple gift of love, the gift of an animal, can change the way in which people think and act because it gives us a new vision.

Want your life to take a new direction? Then change the direction of your thinking. Proverbs 23: 7 tells us so: For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.

George Washington Carver said this powerful Truth: Where there is no vision, there is no hope.

Your imagination, your vision, is the soil of your life. It matters not what is planted; if you plant it, it will grow – whether positive or negative. Your heart’s eye, your imagination, is your spiritual womb; it is where you give birth to your life. But you choose whether the thought-seeds you imagine are positive, productive, and beneficial, which is Hope, or negative and destructive ideas, which become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Actually, they are both self-filling prophesies aren’t they? Only one we call hope and the other we call despair.

What pictures are we holding in our minds and hearts? Our thoughts are often in pictures. If we hear the word apple, do we see the letters A-P-P-L-E in our minds, or do we see an image of an apple? When we are visioning the future, do we see our self happy and healthy, successful and vibrant? Or do we create pictures of despair and difficulty, illness and disaster?

Being grateful, having faith, holding love in our hearts, and envisioning wonderful blessing leads to Hope. How can it be otherwise? I don’t believe it is possible to embody those qualities and feel despair. And conversely, I don’t think it is possible to have Hope without those qualities.

So as we consider Hope this week, let us keep in mind some of the building blocks of Hope: Gratitude, Faith, Love, and Vision. The Christ came to teach those qualities, demonstrate those qualities, to bolster them within us, and bring our awareness to their importance. It is my prayer that we allow Hope to spring from our hearts and understand that this is what God wants for us, as Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us: “*For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*”

Let us pray….