

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 1:67-79 "God's Christmas Gifts: Hope"

As we enter a new year and a new decade, it's a good time to unwrap the last of "God's Christmas Gifts" - *hope*. The word "hope" is not in the birth narrative, but it is there in the two great songs in Luke 1 from Mary and Zechariah. "Praise be to God who has at last acted as he promised he would, to bring us mercy and salvation and deliverance from our enemies; to bring down the mighty and lift up the humble..." Hope for the future through the birth of these two boys, John and Jesus.

What is *hope*? The expectation that something we desire will come, which means we can wait for it with patience and confidence. Hope is built on trust - but "who you goin' to trust?" 1st century Israel had about given up on hope - they were still ruled brutally by foreigners, their high priests were corrupt puppets hand-picked by Rome; their kings, the Herod family, were not even Jews, and many people put their hope in bands of insurrectionists. But all they produced was more Roman repression, and at times, hundreds of crucifixions per day. Israel needed hope.

We live in a far better place and time, but we have just ended a decade that most Americans will want to forget. We lost our national sense of security on 9/11; we lost confidence in our leaders from Presidents to CEOs to priests; we lost confidence in our bankers and our car makers. Too many people lost their jobs, lost their homes, lost

their dignity, lost their sense of "fair play." The rich got richer, but the poor got poorer, and everyone in between got squeezed. Few people think that things will get better any time soon.

1) God's Plan

In hard times a word from God is needed. When Israel was in the middle of her Exile, the prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the Jews deported to Babylon, with "a word from the LORD": "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... you will call on me and I will hear you and I will deliver you from your captivity." (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

God's plan required an intervention: he would act in his world as never before. So he entered it himself in the person of his Son, who would deliver and bless a million times more people than the few thousand Jews captive in Babylon. He would bring light to people in darkness, and hope to people in despair, and they would learn again that *we can trust God*, and he does have a plan for us. That word of hope would spread around the world and down through time so that even we could hear it. God's tells his people that he plans to give us *hope and a future*.

So what does that mean, exactly? That he will cause the world economy to revive, and America return to prosperity? Not exactly! Nationally, we may have a long hard path ahead. Our trust is still being frayed: regarding the latest would-be airplane bomber, a *NY Times* article this week said "officials in Washington and London have said they are focusing on the possibility that his London years, including his possible contacts with radical Muslim groups in Britain, were decisive in turning him toward Islamic extremism. That view, if confirmed, would offer a stark reaffirmation that Britain, the United States' closest ally, continues to pose a major threat to American security." Britain poses a major threat to American security? "Racial profiling" is going to take on a whole new meaning for some of us!

What then is the "Christian hope" for the future? That God is restoring his world to rights, and has taken a decisive step toward that in sending his Son. As the Apostle Paul put it: "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:21), because "It is God's will and good pleasure... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:9-10). Or in the words of the mystic Lady Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

2) *The Christian Hope*

How do we get there from here? The New Testament view is that what Jesus did in his birth, his life, his death and especially his resurrection, achieved victory over the power of sin and death to hold people and all creation in bondage. In his risen life, Jesus shows what will one day happen to those who trust him, and to all things. But even now as we await that great Day, "his children" can begin to experience what it means to "be brought together under one head,

even Christ" and are given the task of working with God to make "all manner of things well."

That is God's promise, and he can be trusted, but of course his restoring work seems to us to be thwarted daily in this world. If "sin and death are defeated" in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, why do we all still suffer and still die? Paul wrestles with this in his letters to the young Christians of the 1st century. He never gives up his confidence that God is working all things ultimately for good. But he wrestles with the great enemy, death, in 1 Corinthians 15.

What Paul foresees is that many will die before God's promises are finally fulfilled, but death cannot take God's people out of God's hands: they will rest in his presence, with Christ, until the Great Day comes. Then at *The Resurrection* they will be outfitted with *new bodies*, much as Jesus was when he rose. Now it's easy to get confused here. Bishop of Durham N.T. Wright has written (in his book *Surprised By Hope*) about the way we often talk of "dying and going to heaven" as the way God will fulfill his promises to us. But that is *not* the way the New Testament speaks of God's plan. "Being in heaven" is only what the theologians call "the intermediate state," a temporary rest for God's people *until the Resurrection*. So, says Wright, it's not so much that Christians believe in "life after death;" rather we believe in "life *after* life after death."

What does that mean? That on the great Day of the Lord we will not be whisked away from earth or from our graves to an eternal "spiritual" existence in heaven. On the contrary, the images of the book of Revelation are of "a new heaven and a *new earth*... the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" so that "*the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them*" (Rev 21:1-4). He comes down, and all things

are put to rights, and “all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

Is all this the infamous promise of “pie in the sky when you die”? “No!” says Paul as he wraps up 1 Corinthians 15: hope means that right now you should “*stand firm; let nothing move you, because your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*” Every good thing that you do or make or work for, now, in this life on this old earth, will find its place and its fulfillment in God’s new earth. When God dwells with his people, there will be no more tears or mourning or sorrow or pain, and death, “the final enemy,” will be done away with, and all that is good in God’s world will become “glorious” in his presence. The mighty will finally be put down, the humble lifted up, and all that is good will be exalted.

So Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, *be careful how you build* your life now on the foundation of Jesus Christ – if you use good materials, your construction will stand on the new earth; if you build your life with rubbish, it will be consumed – and although you yourself will come safely through “the great building inspection,” your shoddy building will not! So build what is good and right and just and pure and true and noble and praiseworthy, because every beautiful and worthwhile thing you do or make here will shine in its glory in the world to come.

And because our labor in the Lord is not in vain, we have “hope and a future” now, today! All last year I had those words from Jeremiah 29 pasted to my refrigerator door, and without them I would not have survived 2009. Hope makes it possible for all of us who believe to live life well, to be a blessing to other people, to show the world what a life “*lived together under the headship of Christ*” looks like, even in its present imperfect form!

In God’s plan, nothing good is ever wasted: kindness, sacrifice, love, trust; education, art,

music, literature; science, technology, flourishing communities, good government; none of it is “in vain” if it is “*labor in the Lord.*” That is our hope – that our times and our works are in God’s hands, and hope is “an anchor for our souls” (Heb 3:19). So may our future be dedicated to things that will last!

Let us pray...