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First Christian Church
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Hope

From Isaiah 11 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.... The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea....

Romans 15:5-7, 12-13 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.... 12 [For] again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The traditional themes for the four Sundays in Advent are hope, peace, joy, and love. They are the themes that the church for generations has used to guide its preparations for Christmas. And that first theme – hope – is one that think is indeed particularly apt and fitting for this first Sunday of Advent when we maybe aren't quite ready and still a little disoriented from moving from Thanksgiving to Christmastime in the space of less than 72 hours. Why do I say that the theme of "hope" is especially apt for such a day? Well, think a moment with me about what the culture has sometimes done to meaning of "hope." For example, Friday's annual shopping marathon, Black Friday, is always full of stories about what gets called "hope." People are interviewed and they talk about getting to the Walmart or Target or Sears in the middle of the night because they "hope" they can get a jump on everyone else and get some of those bargains. But that kind of hope too often turns sour, doesn't it? For the

other kind of stories are also sadly predictable: the woman in Los Angeles who “hoped” she could get the bargain she’d come looking for and “hoped” the other people in line wouldn’t – so she pepper-sprayed them sending more than a dozen to the hospital. In another store, this frenzy of “hope” led to a man being Tasered. In Arkansas, there was a riot and fist fights between people “hoping” to get a \$2 waffle iron. In Michigan, a teenager who had “hoped” to get a bargain the electronics section of the store never made it because she fell and was trampled by the crowd.

But despite these examples of “hope” gone sour, I don’t want to give up on hope. For hope *is* one of the grandest and most powerful themes of the Christian faith, but each year it does seem in danger of being more and more trivialized. So this morning, as we begin our journey towards Christmas – ready or not! – let us reflect together about what hope means for Christians, and what the difference is between Christian hope and other things that sometimes *masquerade* as hope. Because I know that sometimes I have fallen for that counterfeit “hope” instead of the real thing, and I suspect you may have too.

The theme of hope is evident in our passage from the prophet Isaiah. The lion and the lamb are lying down together. The whole earth comes to know God. The world is characterized by righteousness and faithfulness. The entire passage is saturated with hope. And, I don’t know about you, but when I hear such words, such visions, I sometimes think “these folks must have had it easy; otherwise they wouldn’t have talked like this.” But they didn’t. The prophet who penned this portion of the book of Isaiah was writing to the Hebrew people when they were in exile in Babylon. Cut off from home. Not knowing when – if ever – they would return. They had seen the ignominious defeat of their king and the end of his dynasty, the end of the line of those kings dating back to King David, the line of kings that they thought would last forever. But it didn’t. No, that royal tree is now just a **stump**. Which is exactly why the prophet

uses that language, saying that even in the midst of what would seem like hopelessness God will in fact bring a new shoot, new life, out of that stump. Now Christians, of course, have interpreted that language as pointing to Jesus, the new messiah, the new king in the lineage of David. And that is precisely why the church universal focuses on this language at Advent and Christmas: it is because even when things appear hope~~less~~, **God** does not lose hope and acted and continues to act in and through Jesus Christ.

And so the first thing we learn and are reminded of at every Advent is that God is a God of hope. Even when things are most dire, God's hope does not fail. But what does that mean for us? Well, let's look deeper and notice first of all two things that genuine Christian hope is NOT

First of all, genuine Christian hope is not merely "wishful thinking." Do you know the story of the little boy who hoped for a pony for Christmas? All autumn and into Thanksgiving and Advent he made it clear that he hoped Santa would bring him a pony for Christmas. When he went to the mall to see Santa, he told Santa that he had been a good boy and hoped that Santa would bring him a pony for Christmas. Despite the fact that his parents kept telling him, as gently as they knew how to do, that there was not going to be a pony for Christmas (because there was hardly room for the family in their apartment, much less large livestock) he was not discouraged. "I hope I'll get a pony. I hope I'll get a pony." Finally Christmas morning came. And there was no pony tied to the tree outside the apartment. But his older brother, being mean as sometimes only older brothers can be, gave him a pretty, gift-wrapped box. And inside, when he hoped it, was a big ziploc bag full of manure. And the boy shouted "Hooray!" and went running outside. His parents went after him and asked him what he was so excited about. He said "If there's manure, then there's gotta be a pony here somewhere!"

You and I may not "hope" for a pony under the tree, but at the same time you

and I have all done this confusion of wishful thinking with hope. Wishful thinking is whistling in the dark, ever more loudly, to drown out the fact that there really is very little confidence that what is desired will in fact come to be. And we all, as I say, have done it, confusing thereby hope with wishful thinking. We ignore that problem in our life or our marriage or our relationships or with our children simply “hoping” it will go away – wishing, sometimes desperately that that were so, but knowing deep down that it won’t.

Now, that kind of wishful thinking disguised as hope can sometimes be charming and funny. I’m reminded of the story of the man who approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded, "Eighteen to nothing--we're behind." "Gosh," said the spectator, "I'll bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged?" replied the little boy. "We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"¹ That sort of expectation can be funny and charming and even inspiring. But – and here’s the bottom line – even though on **occasion** wishful thinking does come true (anybody who’s spent anytime in Las Vegas knows that), it is not true hope, Christian hope. And it is too thin and unnourishing a diet to provide real sustenance for life’s journey. Wishful thinking instead of hope will finally disappoint and leave us less able to deal with life.

But, secondly, genuine Christian “hope” sometimes also can get confused with “**willful** thinking.” “Willful thinking” is to have convinced yourself that something will happen – even though you have no real *expectation* that it will necessarily happen. Willful thinking, disguised as hope, becomes a way to try to manipulate life. When one of our sons was small, he was fascinated by trains. He loved to be near them and especially loved having a train appear when we were out driving and we’d have to stop at the railroad crossing. But if we crossed too many railroad tracks that were trainless,

¹www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/h/hope.htm

he got increasingly annoyed. *“Daddy, I want a train... I need a train....”* And finally, *“Daddy, **make** a train come.”* And while I was bemused in his absolute confidence in my supernatural, fatherly powers that to him were so great that I could force trains to appear at will, he always got disappointed. Despite my many abilities, I just couldn’t make the train come. And his “willful thinking” – if I say it long enough or loud enough or confidently enough – didn’t work either.

And while we may chuckle at such an example, I know that sometimes I have had my own examples of “willful thinking,” disguised as hope, particularly during this season. *“Oh I hope that this year all the presents that I buy will be exactly absolutely right – and by force of will I am going to make it so.” “I hope that the two members of my family who couldn’t get along last Christmas or the Christmas before or, sadly, on every Christmas I ever remember will this year be loving and caring to each other – and by force of my will I will make it so.” “I hope that this year Christmas will be ‘just right’ – and by force of will I will make it so.”* But hope disguised as “willful thinking” just doesn’t work, does it? And even when we aren’t quite so brazen about it, some of us – I know that I have! – can sometimes get this increasingly manic quality about our preparations for Christmas that suggests somewhere deep inside we think that maybe this year we can indeed force everything to be just right.

But we can’t. We can’t do it at any other season of the year and in any other times of life, and we can’t do it at Christmas either. Such a “hope” is not really hope at all, but simply misplaced confidence that can leave us dispirited and even depressed.

So if true hope, Christian hope, Christmas hope is neither wishful thinking nor willful thinking, what is it? Well, let me turn to our other reading from Paul for this morning. Did you hear it: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”* True hope,

Christian hope, Christmas hope is founded always, first of all, on a living relationship to the living God. It is God who can give us joy and peace and hope, not our wishful or willful thinking. Second, true hope, Christian hope, Christmas hope is active, not passive. To “abound in hope” is not just to have a certain kind of feeling, it is to **do** certain things for the right reasons. As with the notion of “love,” our culture treats “hope” as a feeling that you just happen to have or not, something that happens to you or not. But in the Christian tradition, that’s not true. To have hope is not simply to have a certain kind of feeling, but to do certain kinds of things. True hope, Christian hope, Christmas hope, works for the things that it longs for but not because it somehow thinks that it can force them to happen. And true hope, Christian hope, Christmas hope may well expect – and should expect! – certain things to happen – but not the point of such wishful thinking that the reality of things is ignored. Because sometimes no matter how much we want and would like to expect a pony – or whatever your or my adult equivalent of that is – it doesn’t happen. And yet that should not cause us to lose our hope.

Because finally our hope – true hope, Christian hope, Christmas hope – is grounded not in what we expect or what we do or don’t do. It is grounded in God and God’s faithfulness to creation. After all, that is finally what the Christmas story is about: God’s keeping faith with God’s own hopes for creation. That is why God sent Jesus Christ – to continue to show us sometimes dense human beings what the truth is, what is truly life-giving, what truly makes for life abundant. But maybe a story tells it better...

The school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class

teacher. *"We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now,"* the regular teacher said, *"and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."* The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, *"I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs."* When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much. But the next day, a nurse asked her, *"What did you do to that boy?"* The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. *"No, no,"* said the nurse. *"You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."* Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: *"They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"*²

God wouldn't send a savior if He'd given up on us, would He? And indeed the glory, the comfort, and the good news of this season is that God's hope never gives up on us. Ever. And so, my friends, in turn "may the God of hope fill **[us]** with all joy and peace in believing, so that [we too] may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Amen!

²ibid.