

Community Church of Issaquah

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The Absence of Hope

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The Advent Season is an unusual time for some of us. Growing up in a Baptist church in the South, I had never heard of Advent. The days before Christmas was a time in my church when we collected a special offering that honored a former missionary to China. It wasn't until I began a new ministry at a church in Kansas that I was asked to make sure that the church had an Advent Wreath. Not knowing what in the world that was, I went to the local florist and placed an order for one. I was excited to pick it up and take it to the church so those who were decorating the church could place it appropriately. Imagine my shock and embarrassment when one older woman came up to me and said, "This Advent Wreath is all wrong. It's supposed to have three purple candles, one pink candle and a white one in the middle. This wreath has all red candles."

A return trip to the florist was in order. The florist and I made the correction, and I learned my lesson about this special season in the life of the church. By the way, that florist and I have remained close friends since that "oops" experience, and that was 1978. Luckily, I've learned more about this season and actually find myself looking forward to celebrating it. Some years, I even have my own Advent wreath at home. I am reminded that the word 'advent' is Latin for 'coming.' And so, we honor the 'coming' of someone of importance, Jesus.

The symbols of the Advent Wreath can be interpreted in many ways. The circle of the wreath is a reminder that there is no beginning and no ending of God and our faith. The lighting of the candles shows our work to becoming prepared, and shows the new light that bursts forth on Christmas. The first two candles focus on the prophetic aspects of the coming of a Messiah – hope and peace. The second two candles remind us of two beautiful aspects of the coming of and birth of Jesus. These are the candles of joy and love. On Christmas Eve, the center white candle is lit, the light of Christ who is present. Jesus is born. And that's the center of the Advent celebration.

As we focus on today's lighting of the first candle of our Advent wreath here, we are reminded that each of these candles represents some aspect of Christmas. Today we focus on 'hope' and in the weeks to come, we will honor peace, joy and love before our Christmas Eve lighting of the candle honoring Jesus Christ. So, what about this concept of 'hope?' What does that mean for us today? What did it mean in the days of the Israelites?

Like the prophets and people of the Old Testament, we sometimes find ourselves seeking to be saved from the world that surrounds us, often filled with hate, violence, and chaos. We hear about the second coming of Christ and sometimes anticipate that. The children of Israel hoped that God would fulfill the prophecies about the coming of a Messiah to rescue them. If we were honest, there might be days in our own lives when we seek and hope for the same

kind of rescue from evil and what seems lost in our own world today.

Christians like us too often get the word 'hope' confused. For us, it's too often more 'wishful thinking' than the Biblical meaning which is a secure assurance. In the days before the birth of Jesus and the coming of a Messiah, believers placed their trust in a trustworthy God. Their foundation of belief was that if God claimed he would do something in the future as prophesied, then they had hope that God would fulfill that claim. They hoped and they waited. Their hope withstood the trials, the struggles, and the despair that was a part of their daily lives as they waited.

Hope, as we honor it in our candle lighting today, isn't weak or wishful thinking. Hope isn't a casual comment to simply say, "Hope you have a good day," or "Gosh, I hope it doesn't snow this year," or "I hope you get everything on your Christmas wish list." That's only wishful thinking. Real hope is very different. Real hope is much more important in our lives as Christians.

Hope is a very important element in our faith. It is what we rely on in times of distress or trials. Real hope gives us the security in knowing that God will honor what he has promised in our lives. Just as the New Testament writers told us, God will return and even though we cannot see him now, one day we will see him face to face. We hope that, like the prophets and people of old, Jesus will return to our dark and despairing world. We long for Christ to

come to our world to reign with compassion and justice and peace. We hope.

The prophet Isaiah cried to God, begging him to open the heavens and to come down. There was real hope there. Hope that Jesus would come as promised and “fix” the broken world. In our Christian faith, we long for the same thing, that God will “fix” what is broken in our own lives. In times when we have health issues that deeply concern us, we invest our hope in a loving God who will see us through those hard times. When there are family crises, we put our hope in God to mend the fractures and reunite us into a loving family. When we seem to have lost our way and don’t know where we are supposed to be or what we are supposed to do, we put our hope in Christ to be the light in that dark place. Because that is what ‘hope’ is for us – a light in a dark place.

My mother once told me, “Faith is walking all the way to the end of the light and taking one more step.” I’m not sure where she got that from, but I’ve never forgotten it. I’ve used that as a definition of faith for my adult life. But I also use it to help me understand what ‘hope’ is. Hope is that feeling you get when you take that last step and believe there is solid ground beneath you, and sure enough, there is.

What are we hoping for today? More than anything else, we should place our hope in the belief that what we are doing, who we are being, and where we are going is at the guidance of the God who called us and who saved us. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, every word

in our Scriptures points to God's gift of hope that we have because of a fulfilled promise – Jesus Christ. From the prophets to the disciples and to us this very day, the core of our faith is founded on hope.

We would be mistaken if we thought that the story of Christmas was the end of the message of hope. Yes, God did promise a messiah. And yes, Jesus was born to fulfill that prophesy. But hope didn't end for the Israelites with the fulfillment of a promise, and it hasn't ended for us because Christ was born. Hope lives on. It is what moves us to attach our faith to the promises that God gives to all believers. Our hope that God will do what he said he would do – redeem us, bless us, love us.

Perhaps we need to call on God to help us see that he is still with us. To see that nothing is impossible, too difficult, or too messy when we put our hope in God. If nothing else, this reminder of the first Christmas when Jesus was born should show us that yes indeed, our hopes can be met. Just as the hope of God's people came to life with that birth, it can come to life for us today.

The Bible records for us that not all of God's people believed that the hope of a messiah had come true. Many denied Christ was the Son of God, just as many deny that today. But can you imagine the overwhelming joy that came to those who did see their hope realized? I tend to like the picture of the shepherds and the wise men who wanted to shout, "Our hope is finally here! Praise God!"

But in truth, the nativity is not the end of the hope of God's fulfilling promises. It was a new beginning for all of us who believe in Christ. This birth of a child who was a descendant of a bent family tree, who was not born in a palace, but was born of a chosen tribe from a small town with no importance has great significance. Perhaps this simple story was difficult for some to believe that it was the fulfillment of God's promise for their hope of a redeemer. It also teaches us something about our own hope as well.

When we place our hope in God to help us, we need not imagine giant outpourings of that help, but rather that God will come in simple ways to show us that we are truly loved. When we hope that God will help us in a life struggle, perhaps God's answer might be the sending of a friend or loved one who will simply be there for us. To be present. When we hope for guidance in making life changing decisions, perhaps God's gift to us would be in the simple words of a verse or a song or a message from another who has been there, too.

This Advent Season, I want to hope big time that God will make this a wonderful time of a complicated year for me, and maybe you, too. I'm quite sure that answer won't come in a huge pile of gifts under a tree or a flood of Christmas cards or the biggest Christmas dinner ever. I place my hope in God to give me comfort in small ways, and I rest in the knowledge that there will be an answer to my hope, because God said he would honor those who believe. I'm ready now, God. I'm hoping.

What is your hope this Advent and Christmas season?

