

November 29, 2020
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; 60:1-3



Even though you are not here, tell someone hello. Type a hello into the livestream or add a wave.

Since you could not be here today for Advent, we are bringing Advent to you! Including my Advent blazer. Sometimes, you have to dress the part. We appreciate those who came to decorate the church for Advent. I think we enjoy and appreciate it more than ever this year.

Today is the beginning of Advent, and as we enter the season, I begin a new series of messages titled *A Light in the Darkness*. The series is based on the Advent candles and their meaning – hope, peace, love, and joy. Today’s message will be *hope*. Do you believe we need a bit more hope than usual this year? We most certainly do.

Our Scripture text comes from the prophet Isaiah, a combination of two passages. Follow along with me as I read those passages. Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; 60:1-3 –

² *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

⁶ *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and*

upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

¹ *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*

² *See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*

³ *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

I have hope that life will return to normal.

It has been a long 9 months. We have lived through shutdowns and partial openings and all the ups and downs of the year. And all those ups and downs have been part of the life of the church as well. We are now in our third period of shutting down in-person worship. By the time this shutdown is over – after December 13th, we *hope* – it will be a total of 18 weeks we will be out of worship. 18 weeks! Who could ever have imagined! It is what we must do to keep people safe, but I will admit that I don't like it. I worry about what it means for us in the short term and in the long term. I wonder if people will come back when the pandemic is over. I wonder if we will be fully restored to where we were. As I look out at empty chairs, I have *hope* they will one day be filled. I *hope* we will come back stronger than ever before. I *hope* our ministries will grow and reach more people. I *hope*.

But when we talk about life returning to normal, we must remember that life was never normal for many people. Years ago I received a call about a family needing assistance. It was close to Christmas, and I drove to their home with some groceries and other items. It was a dreary day, cold and rainy. Their home was back a long, muddy driveway, and the yard was more mud than grass. The home was in very poor repair, and it was obvious the family had great financial needs.

As I got out of the car, trudging through the mud and with the rain falling on me, I was grumbling to myself about the miserable weather. It was at that moment a young boy, about six or seven years old, came running out to greet me. My first thought was to feel bad for him, living

in such difficult circumstances. I thought about Christmas and wondered if there would be much for him and his family. I asked him how he was doing and he was very excited, and he reminded me Christmas was only a few days away. His excitement level rose the longer he spoke. I wanted to say *don't get your hopes up. It's okay if you don't get much.* In my mind, I could just sense the disappointment he would face on Christmas morning, assuming something to be true that might not have at all been true. But I realized later how wrong it was of me to try to qualify his hope, because hope is one of the greatest gifts of Christmas, and the message of Christmas is especially designed for those who need hope. And who doesn't need hope! I also realized it was a call to me to be an agent of hope. We got together more items for that family, to bring them not only a better Christmas day, but a sense of hope that people cared about them and about their circumstances.

This pandemic has been tough for all of us, but for the people for whom life was already very difficult, it has brought the danger of extinguishing the hope they possessed. We will have a lot to do to get things back to normal, and as we do, we must remember that bringing life back to normal means remembering those whose lives have been so damaged by what has taken place.

Isaiah said, *He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. Justice and righteousness* means to care for those who have lost hope and to make provision for those in need, and we will do so.

I have hope that God's love will light the way.

Isaiah says, ²*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.* I feel that the phrase *those living in the land of deep darkness* is too often descriptive of our world. It is as though we are walking and living in a land of shadows, where we are unable to clearly see the truth of God's love. God created this beautiful, wonderful world, full of light and love and goodness, but every act of hatred, every word of bitterness, every

moment of division brings a bit more darkness to our world. We have moved from the full and wonderful light of God's perfect creation to a world consumed more and more with darkness.

When we are peering through the darkness, when we are straining to see through the shadows, we are unable to see the full truth of what God has created. In the shadows, we see only the barest image of the beauty of each person. Unable to see others for who they truly are, we make judgments out of the dim outlines of what we see. And seeing so little, seeing only those dim outlines, those judgments become harsher, they become more fearful, and they bring more darkness upon us.

We have been walking in darkness, and it seems as though this year has brought more darkness to us. But we also see moments of light breaking through. While we have seen bitterness, and anger, and selfishness, we have also seen flashes of light in those who have sacrificed for the good of others, we have seen flickers of light in those who give of what they have so that others might find the provision they need. We see light on the horizon, as hope brings a glimmer, and then an increasingly growing light.

The lighting of the candle of hope is but a small flicker of light. It is a fragile light, as it can be easily extinguished. But let us remember that all over the world, as Advent begins, the candle of hope has been lighted, and though the light of a single candle does not seem to do much against so much darkness, the combination of those lights dispel much darkness. When brought together, those lights form one light that cannot be extinguished.

Do not lose hope. Do not despair. Do not believe that the light of hope in your heart can ever be distinguished or overcome by the darkness. The light of God's love is within you, and it burns ever so brightly!

I find hope, great hope, in the light of the world, Jesus.

As easy as it is to be discouraged during this time, I remind myself of the difficulties of the first Christmas. It was a dark time in history, filled with violence and struggle. The times into which Jesus was born were

difficult, dangerous, and full of overwhelming challenges. This is one of the reasons why the life, message, and ministry of Jesus resonated so strongly with people. Jesus was a sign of hope, a hope that was so badly needed.

Light is one of the most important and enduring symbols of Christmas. At Advent we proclaim the message of John 8:12, that Jesus *is the light of the world*. We surround ourselves with lights, reminding us of that truth.

This time of year, when the darkness settles on us so early, we know the *hope* that the days will once again grow longer. On a dreary day, we hope the sun will return to dry out the soggy earth and bring some warmth. And, in a deeper way, we all *hope* for the day when we move out of the darkness of the pandemic and embrace life once again in all of its fullness.

The joy of the season is dampened for many because of economic uncertainty. Job losses have mounted and among those who are employed there is anxiety about what their future holds. But the message of Advent remains a message of hope. We worship a God who cares that we have what we need, and he has provided resources among his people to care for one another.

Hope is hard, and we should not be surprised by that reality. That's why we need hope, because hope is strong enough to move us to believe that the world can be better. Only hope is strong enough to move us to believe that we can be better. That others can be better. That love can overcome hate. That peace can overcome violence.

I officiated at a couple of funerals in the past few days. No time is a good time for funerals, certainly, but at Thanksgiving and Advent it is especially difficult. I have officiated at some very difficult funerals over the course of my ministry, but Friday morning was so very difficult. It was the result of an almost hope-shattering event. At Deanie's funeral I spoke about hope, and this is what I said –

Sunday is the beginning of Advent, and I am preaching on hope. That is a bit more challenging this year, but I don't know where we would be without hope. Hope is the foundation of our faith... We will soon come

to the darkest day of the year, when nature seems to tell us that the darkness has won out over the light. But the days will gradually begin to change, as the light comes earlier and stays later. Gradually, but ever more noticeably, we will realize that the light has once again been victorious over the darkness.

The light that flickers on the candle of hope this morning seems so fragile, but it is very strong, surprisingly strong, amazingly strong! It is strong because it is powered by the light of the world, Jesus.

² *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

⁶ *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

⁷ *Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

¹ *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*

² *See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*

³ *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Amen, and amen!