

Back to Church Sunday - Hope Is Here
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I want to welcome you to Back to Church Sunday. This year's theme is Hope is Here. Hope is where? Here, in the church.

You see, in the middle of the current COVID pandemic, we are experiencing another epidemic, or widespread life-threatening issue. We are experiencing an epidemic of hopelessness. It's life threatening because hopelessness drains the life out of people.

People have lost hope in:
 The world ever getting any better
 The ability of government to govern
 The ability of people to get along with others
 A better future.

In fact, I know of some young people who are seriously considering not having children because they don't want to bring them into a world with no hope. That is so sad! And what's even sadder is that the rates of addiction and suicide are increasing exponentially because people have no hope!

But, the more I see our world falling apart, the more I believe that the church of Jesus Christ is the hope for our world.

Because He is our hope – we can offer the world hope.
 Governments can't really give hope.
 Businesses can't give hope.
 Entertainers offer false hope.
 But the church - with all of its flaws, has hope to give!

After Jesus finished His work on earth, before He ascended into heaven, He told His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

I can imagine Jesus ascending into heaven and being asked by the angels, "What now? What's your plan?"
 Jesus said, "Look down there. See my disciples?"
 Angels, "You mean that small group holed up in that upper room?"
 Jesus said, "That's my plan."
 Angels, "Are you sure? Is there a backup plan?"
 Jesus, "Nope, that's my whole plan."

Jesus made it abundantly clear that the church is God's plan for the world and there is no plan B - no backup - no substitute. In fact, He said in Matthew 16:18

Upon this rock I will build My church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.

In no uncertain terms, Jesus made it clear that His church will be able to withstand any force that comes against it! And that has been true throughout history!

Sometimes people feel like Christians we have nothing much to offer the world. That's because we tend to only look at the impact of a local church rather than the huge impact of the church around the world! The universal church is doing more to help people around the world than every other organization combined!

And even in this local church, we are feeding and clothing people around the world as well as feeding the homeless here in Grand Prairie. During the pandemic - we have been able to meet the financial needs of every church member who asked for help!

But in spite of that, the hope we bring has very little to do with what we are able to accomplish together. The hope we bring is not about our strength, but God's. Even when we feel like we have little to offer, we have Jesus! And Jesus is enough! In fact, He is more than enough!

Jesus is the hope of the world - and because we have Jesus - the church is the hope for our world. That is because we are the only people who have hope for now and hope for eternity. 1 Peter 1:3 says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Through Jesus we have a hope that lasts forever!
It does not come and go because it is not based on circumstances.
It is based on the cross and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!

As believers, one of our distinctive characteristics should be hope! That's because when we trust in God, He fills us with hope! Romans 15:13 says:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we trust in God, we are filled with hope! So, if you have no hope, it means you are not trusting in God!

And when are filled with the Spirit, we are filled to overflowing with hope!
So, if you've lost your hope, don't seek hope!

Seek a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit!!

So – the church has hope because of faith in Christ. The church has hope because of the power of the Spirit. And the church has hope because of the word of God. Romans 15:4 says:

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

If you've lost hope – not only do you need to trust God and be filled with the Spirit, but you also need the encouragement of the Scriptures. You need to feed your hope by feeding on the word of God! You also receive hope by praying for it! Ephesians 1:18-23 says:

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe.

That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the benefit of the church. And the church is His body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with Himself.

We should all be praying to fully know our hope in God, our riches in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. All things are under His feet for the benefit of the church! He is the head and we are the body of Christ! What does the body of Christ mean?

I want to look at that, but first I want to share what I learned this week as I did a study on the names of the church in the Bible. I found about 50 names. I don't have time to mention them all, but there are names like:

The Assembly of the Saints - The Body of Christ - The Bride of Christ –

The Church of God - The City of God - The Family of God

The Flock of God - The House of God - The People of God

I want to focus on a few of these names to show why the church is the hope of the world.

1– The church is the hope of the world because we are the body of Christ

What does that mean? When Jesus was born, He lived in a physical body through which He demonstrated the love, grace and truth of God.

After He ascended into heaven, Christ continues that same work of demonstrating the love, grace and truth of God – but now He does it through those who believe in Him.

The church now functions as the Body of Christ. He is the head, but we are His hands and feet. We share His truth with our words and show His truth by our actions. The church – as the Bod of Christ – is the physical representation of Christ to the world today! The Church is the way Jesus manifests His life to the world today! 1 John 4:17 says:

Love has been perfected in us... because as He is, so are we in this world.

When Jesus was alive on earth, people believed in Him because what He said and what He said and did. Now – they either believe or don't believe based on what we say and do! You're the only Jesus some people will ever see. That's why how we live is important. That's why we need to be people of hope!

Ephesians 2:12 talks about people who are: *without hope and without God in the world*. People who are without God are without hope. They are desperate for hope! And they look for hope everywhere except the right place: the church!

But when they do turn to us, we must be ready. In fact, they won't turn to the church if we are not ready already! 1 Peter 3:15 says:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

When's that last time someone asked you why you are so hopeful in a world full of despair?

Why are you so loving in a world full of hate?

Why are you so peaceful in a world full of fear?

Why are you so kind in a world full of meanness?

Why are you so joyful in a world full of sadness?

What is different about you?

Most of us are not asked those questions because we are not all that different from the world. Instead, we have the same fears, same sadness and same hopelessness. My brothers and sisters, this should not be!

The church needs to be able to say to them: we have the answer to your hopelessness. Hope is here in the church because Jesus is here, His word is here, His presence is here, His Spirit is here, His power is here!

That's why I hate it when believers think they can make it without church in their lives. When believers disconnect from the body of Christ, they tend to become hopeless. Hebrews 10:23-25 says:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

One of the sad consequences of COVID is that some people have disconnected from church. They have given up meeting together. They are out of the habit of meeting together and they now have the habit of not meeting together. As a result, many lose their hope because they lose the power of other believers spurring them on in their faith.

They lose the encouragement that church provides –
 that worshipping together provides –
 that hearing the word preached provides –
 that being connected to other believers provides!

Not only is the church the hope of the world – it is the hope of believers!
 It is the main way we receive hope from God.
 The church is the hope of the world, but we can only give hope when we have hope to give!

2- The church is the hope of the world because we are the house of God

The church is not a building – a building is where the church meets! The church is people a called-out assembly people who have trusted Jesus with their lives and choose to support one another in the journey.

When we gather together to bear one another's burdens, we find hope. We find a hope that empowers us to overcome anything life can throw at us. And we can only give the world hope when we have hope to give. That's why Hebrews 3:4 & 6 says:

Every house has a builder, but the one who built everything is God. But Christ, as the Son, is in charge of God's entire house. And we are God's house, if we keep our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ.

Here's a key to us being the house of God. Ephesians 2:19-22 says:

You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The church is a habitation for God's presence. Yes, God is omnipresent – He's everywhere. But Jesus said that when we 2 or 3 of us gather together, He is there in the midst of us. Evidently, there is a manifestation of God's presence in our gatherings that is different from omnipresence.

So – the church is the hope of the world because God's presence is here!
 God's power is here!
 Hope is here because God is here.

There is power in the praises of God's people and there is power in the prayers of God's people. Prayer is one of the most powerful things we can do as the church. When Christians stand in prayer for individuals, cities, nations and the world, God shows up. And when God shows up – hope shows up!

3– The church is the hope of the world because we have God's truth

A primary purpose of the church is to bring the truth to the whole world. What is that truth? It's the truth of God's word. The truth of the gospel of Jesus and His finished work on the cross is something that the world must hear. And they will only hear it through us! 1 Timothy 3:15 says:

I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

The church is the hope of the world because we have God's truth to build our lives on.

When we build on His truth, our house will stand when storms come.

When we build on man's truth, everything will fall apart.

And people all around us have their lives and families falling apart because they are not building their lives on truth. And we can only help them when we build our lives on the truth!

Throughout history, the church has had the boldness to have hope in the face of trouble. It stems from the victory of the resurrected Jesus Christ. When things looked the darkest for Jesus, as He hung on the cross, He knew it was far from over. The tomb would not be the end - He would defeat death and come back to life. With this as the Church's backdrop, there is always reason for hope.

The local church is the hope of the world when it is working right. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken. It builds bridges to seekers and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, and the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world.

Until the church, that is you and me, have a heart for God and His righteousness, the church will not be the hope of the world. If the church does not offer hope to the world then the world will have no hope.

Hope is in found in Jesus and Jesus is found in the lives of the authentic believers who make up the Local church.

The church is the hope of the world:
When we live like Christ
When we love others unconditionally

When we put others above ourselves
 When we humble serve one another in love
 When we seek first the kingdom of God
 When we are full of the Holy Spirit
 When we preach the whole counsel of God
 When we speak the truth in love
 When we are united in the spirit
 When we are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience,
 kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control!

In the Gospels, Jesus was always offering hope to those around Him. Whatever people were going through, Jesus would meet their need.

People in the Bible knew that if Jesus is here, then hope is here!
 And we need to know that because Jesus is here, hope is here!

Yes, a pandemic is here and people are dying, but hope is here because the Great Physician is here!

Yes, tough financial times are here, but hope is here because Jehovah Jireh our provider is here!

Yes, division is in our nation, but hope is here because in Christ we are all one!

Yes, wickedness is abundant, but hope is here because where sin abounds, grace much more abounds!

Yes, relationships are difficult these days, but hope is here because Jesus can break down walls between us.

Yes, people are grieving the loss of loved ones, but hope is here because the Bible says that even when we grieve – we do not grieve like those who have no hope.

We have the hope of Jesus being here with us now and we have the hope of being with Him forever where there is no pain and no tears.

Only the joy of being with Him in heaven forever!

If you find yourself without hope today, whether because of circumstances you cannot control or situations that you are responsible for, I want to offer you hope today.

I want to offer you hope for a better tomorrow, hope for true purpose, hope for a clean slate, and hope for peace and rest.

That hope is only found in Jesus.
 Because when He is here, hope is here.