

The Promised Hope
Pastor Joe Oakley - GFC - 11/26/23

This morning we are beginning a brand-new sermon series called Behold A Savior Is Born. Christmas is one of my favorite times of the year. Houses down the street are strung with lights, stores play Christmas music, and you can eat all kinds of holiday goodies.

Today is also the first Sunday of Advent. The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is traditionally a time of expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing.

Advent is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus’s coming, while at the same time looking forward in hope to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people. Advent is all about hope. So my sermon title is The Promised Hope.

For the next four weeks, we’re going to be exploring how the birth of Christ brought hope, peace, joy, and love to us. And on Christmas Eve, we will celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the Christ. Today we begin with rediscovering the hope of Christmas, even when we are surrounded by uncertainty.

Unfortunately, with all that is going on in our world today, many people have lost hope for their future. Our world is fighting so many things. A worldwide pandemic caused hopelessness. Endless threats of wars and terrorism cause hopelessness. Ever-increasing disasters: earthquakes and fires cause hopelessness. Our nation has ever-increasing division and a debt load that is so large it seems insurmountable – which results in hopelessness.

This will be the first generation of Americans who do not have the hope that they will do better than their parents financially. Young Americans are overwhelmingly pessimistic and hopeless about their future. Hopelessness is a pandemic today! That’s because people who live their lives without God are without hope. Ephesians 2:12 says:

You lived in this world without God and without hope.

But **as believers in Jesus Christ, we should always have hope.** 1 Peter 1:3 says:

In His great mercy God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

In other words – when we have faith in Jesus Christ – when we believe in His death and resurrection – we are born into a new way of life. We are born into a new family called the family of God. But we are also born into a living hope.

Not a hope that comes and goes. But a living, lasting, life-changing hope. Far too many people have stopped hoping for their future. But **when we give up hope, it becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy**. When we lose hope, we stop pursuing God, we lose the will to fight, and our mind becomes a dangerous place.

Without hope for the future, we have no power in the present.
Without hope for the future, we have no motivation or endurance.
But we are born into a living hope, so we need to learn to live in hope!

And I submit to you today that **hopelessness is not a result of circumstances. It's a result of misplaced faith!** People who trust in other people to fix their problems are doomed to hopelessness. People who put their trust in government are doomed to hopelessness. People who put their trust in themselves are doomed to hopelessness. Psalm 118:8-9 says:

It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.

Hope comes from having faith in something bigger than ourselves.

Someone once said, "There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them." Biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It's not an "I hope so" attitude. **Biblical hope is faith for the future!** It is to confidently believe something will happen in the future to the point you prepare for it. What are you preparing for?

For thousands of years, people were preparing for the Messiah to arrive. Old Testament prophets had written about a future day when God would send a savior to His people. He would make a way for all things to be healed from the devastating effects of sin.

Many people were looking for this Messiah, but when He came to earth they didn't believe in Him because He arrived in an unexpected way. They were hoping for a king who would overthrow the Romans who were ruling over Israel. But instead they got a baby born in a dirty stable in Bethlehem. This baby would be the ultimate source of hope for all people. But most people missed out on it. And many people miss out on hope today for the same reason.

We think we have it bad today, but so did Israel back in Bible days. During the time of Jesus, when Israel, like much of the world, was a defeated nation under the thumb of the Roman Empire. It was a harsh day to live in, a time of conquest and brutality.

It had been thousands of years since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the calling out of God's people. It had been thousands of years of being invaded and conquered by enemies like the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. It had been generations since the promise of a Messiah who would make things

right for the people of God.

The coming of the Messiah who would come to make everything right wasn't just a happy idea that drifted in and out of the Israelites' consciousness and culture. It was their deepest hope that sustained them, encouraged them, and spurred them on, especially through thousands of years of uncertain waiting. They clung to the promise of God with hope, even though it took such a long time to arrive.

I want to talk about two of those people who held on to hope. In Luke 2, after the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate Him to the Lord. Verses 25-38 say:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them...

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Now think about this. Almost everyone else in the Christmas story required some convincing about the whole arrangement. Some of them needed dreams and visitations from angels. But not Simeon and Anna!

Did you notice in Luke's account that neither Simeon nor Anna seemed the least bit surprised about the fact that this baby, Jesus, is the long-promised Messiah? Everyone else in the Christmas story seemed surprised by the coming of the Messiah. But not Simeon or Anna! They were filled with hope, and that hope made them ready. They were waiting, watching, listening, and expecting. They expected God to do what He had promised. They believed this! They were waiting for this!

Both Simeon and Anna lived long lives and experienced many things. They experienced the pain of the Roman occupation of Israel. Anna had been a widow for decades. But they both lived in faith and hope in God. And they rejoiced and celebrated and infused new hope into the people around them, including Mary and Joseph who were still figuring out just what it meant to be the earthly parents of God's Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

What is it that caused Simeon and Anna to have such hope? I believe the key is in this one phrase from Simeon in Luke 2:29

Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation...

1. Hope is based on the character and promises of God

Simeon had hope because he trusted the character of God. He knew that God was sovereign. To be sovereign is to be Lord. God rules and reigns over everything and is not limited by anything.

In addition – God is always good. He always works things out for His glory and our good.

In addition – He has given us His word. 2 Peter 1:4 says:

Because of His glory and excellence, God has given us great and precious promises.

See how **God's character and God's promises always go together?** We also see it in Psalm 138:2

I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word above all Your name.

Why has God magnified His word above His name? Think about it. If you get a reputation for not keeping your word – we say that gives you a bad name and when people hear your name – they don't believe your word.

So – God puts the emphasis on magnifying His Word. **God's name is good because God keeps His word.** In Jeremiah 1:12, God said:

I am watching over My word to perform it.

This gives us boldness to believe God's Word and that gives us hope.

So, if you lose hope you should examine your faith in the character of God and your faith in the promises of God. Because as long as we know that God is good and working all things out for our good – we have hope! As long as we believe His word we have hope! 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.

But when we stop trusting God or His word, we have nothing left to hope in!
So be like Simeon and Anna and trust in God's character and His Word!

Simeon and Anna teach us several other things about hope and its power that we can apply in our lives.

2. Hope sees beyond.

Hope sees beyond the struggles of the past and the pain of the present. That's why hope is the fuel of faith.

No matter how bad your year has been, no matter what kind of problems and struggles you are facing right now, no matter what kind of season of darkness and pain you are in, let me encourage you not to abandon hope.

Hope is still alive even in our deepest pain and hopeless circumstances. Hope chases away the darkness and uncertainty. Hope is alive because God is with us. Romans 8:24-26 says:

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Let me reread part of that again. "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?"

You see, **hope exists before reality comes to pass.** When I was a child, I would look at the wrapped gifts under the Christmas tree hoping that I would receive the gifts I longed for. But as soon as I opened the gift on Christmas day, the need for hope was gone. Now I had the reality of the gift. Hope, by its very nature, exists in the uncertainty before we receive.

I love the Amplified Version of Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance (the confirmation, the title deed) of the things we hope for, being the proof of things we do not see and the conviction of their reality.

Hope is the willingness to believe beyond our present circumstances and reality. And faith – now, not in the future – NOW faith is the title deed of the things we hope for!

You might think you own that car you're paying payments for. But miss a few payments and the real owner will show up! It's not until you've paid the car off that you get the title deed.

But in God's kingdom – **faith gives us the title deed for what we hope for even before we see it!** We can know it's ours before we ever see it! In fact, we must know it's ours if we ever want to see it!

Now, I included the beginning of verse 26 in our Romans reading because I think it's vitally important. *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness."* Because that leads us to our third point—

3. God is with us—here, now, and always.

One of the names of Christ is *Immanuel*: This is a Hebrew word that means "God with us."

When creation cried out for help, God did not tell it to get its act together and then He would come close. Rather, God saw that we needed rescue and He made the first move to come toward us. Paul tells us this in Romans 5:8

God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus did not come to us because we deserve it.

He did not come to us because we earned it.

He came to us because He loves us and knew we could not get ourselves out of the mess of sin we were in.

It was the knowledge that God would one day return for His people that kept the people in the Old Testament going. It is what inspired their hope, and today, we are inspired because He has already come, just as was foretold.

Some people are uncertain that God is with us and therefore nothing will ever get better. But with God there is no uncertainty.

God knows your pain and challenges and struggles.

He was not surprised by a pandemic.

He was not surprised when the economy tanked.

And He is not surprised by anything you go through!

He sees you. And He is here. He is Immanuel, God With Us.

This is what fills us with hope!

A hope fanned within us by God's Spirit—even in our weakness.

When we feel too weak to carry on, when we feel our grasp slipping on even the ability to hope, His Spirit is with us. His Spirit gives us hope by reminding us of God's faithfulness and promises. His Spirit leads us into God's Word and its reminders of all God has done for us and all He has promised to do.

Our God, our Immanuel who is with us, has promises that give His people hope, including Isaiah 43:1-2:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...

Do you feel the hope leaping in these words?

We are not alone even at our loneliest or darkest moments.

Christ has come. Our God is with us every step of the way. That's why:

4. Hope inspires us to carry on.

Anna and Simeon carried on through tough times for a long time. Day after day, year after year, Simeon and Anna served God faithfully, inspired and fueled by the hope that God was at work.

Even though they couldn't see it.

Even if they were surrounded by hardship.

Even as time passed and they grew older and older.

Simeon and Anna still held onto hope.

They set their focus on God and worshipped Him, served Him, and hoped in Him as they waited.

The apostle Paul described the cycle of hope like this in Romans 5:2-5:

We boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our tribulations because we know that tribulation produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

This hope from God's Spirit does not put us to shame.

It will not let us down. It will not disappoint us.

Instead it gives us new and growing strength to see beyond the pain and confusion in front of us.

It can feel so impossible to take that first step toward hope when we are weighed down by our burdens. But when we receive the promise of hope in God's Word, we find new strength.

When we accept the power of hope granted to us in God's Spirit, we find new inspiration.

When we focus on the power of hope embodied in the birth and life and death and resurrection and return of Jesus, we discover new strength to take that first step.

Hope inspires us. Hope emboldens us.

Hope builds upon hope and keeps us going, no matter what.

And in the midst of whatever life is throwing at us, we can experience the hope that gives us the strength to take the next step and carry on!