

**The First Sunday in Advent 2021 -
"Hope"
Isaiah 9:2; 6 - 7**

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

"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.

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."

So today we find ourselves in Advent.

Advent means 'arrival' or 'coming'.

It's not Christmas; Advent instead is the season of preparation for Jesus coming in a fresh way to us at Christmas.

It also looks forward to His future arrival in future.

Each Sunday and each week is an opportunity to pause and look at the themes of Advent - hope, peace, joy and love - all of which reach their zenith in the coming of Jesus.

Christ is the hope of the world

There is a golden thread throughout Scripture, right from the beginning when things went so, so wrong, that God would put the world right.

Yes there were detours along the way. There seemed like dead ends.

There were times of absolute horror (remember how we spend a year following the downward spiral of God's people in Judges... It was great wasn't it? 😊).

There were times when God was silent and the word of the Lord was rare.

And there were these times when God's people, Israel, found themselves in dark places - living in exile, living under the rule of foreign power (who were often cruel and merciless), living among false gods and idols.

And of course that raises questions: if God is King, then why are we living under the rule of the pagans?

But every time - *every time* - God spoke a message of hope.

Even though things had gone wrong, there was a larger hope - things can be put right. Things *will* be put right.

It's big story stuff.

It's the story of Israel - the patriarchs, kings, prophets and psalmists all looking to what God was going to do and how God was going to keep His promises.

Yet there is more. It has cosmic dimensions.

In Romans, hope is connected the rescue of all creation and the redemption of our bodies.

Paul speaks of full salvation as something that yet been experienced.

There is this hope that anticipates Jesus Second Advent.

It's Jesus who makes sense as the fulfilment of all God's ancient promises.

Jesus is the hope of the world - anticipated in the Old Testament and experienced in the New.

The Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace has come.

Christ is the hope of the world

So what does that really look like, in this moment in history for people like you and me?

How would you answer that?

"In Advent, 2021 what does hope look like?"

Tell the person next to you.

We acknowledge the larger, greater hopes.

But it's also a grounded hope - grounded in real life.

Paul wrote to Timothy of "Christ Jesus, our hope", our present hope.

I think one of the ways that Jesus can bring hope to people is to those who feel trapped.

What they feel trapped by is this: that life events have had the final say over their lives.

I think of when I went to Bible College in my twenties and I had the support of the church I was a part of at the time.

Not long before I left for the Bible College, I was at a church lunch. And I got talking to a man who was heading towards his retirement years.

As I chatted with him he said, "Yeah, I went to Bible College too when I was younger, with the thought that maybe God was calling into pastoral ministry."

This surprised me because I knew him fairly well but as far as I knew he never served in that capacity.

Without any prompting he explained that as part of the course, he had preaching class.

One the aspects of the preaching class was that you had to prepare a message to share with you classmates.

So I did that and afterwards, the lecturer just let rip, and he said, "Don't you ever preach like that again!"

And he didn't... he never preached again in his life...

That was the last word for him on the matter.

I think that's incredibly sad.

Hope is that Christ can have the final word in the here and now.

Then there's what we might call hope against all hope.

This is Bettina Lerman:



She contracted Covid-19 a couple of months ago along with her cancer-stricken husband.

After becoming infected Lerman was hospitalised on September 12 and placed on a ventilator nine days later. As her condition worsened, she was placed into a coma and her family were told to prepare for the worst.

Her son Andrew said, "We had a family meeting with the hospital because my mother wasn't waking up. No matter what they (did), they couldn't get her to wake up,"

Doctors said the damage to her organs, in particular her lungs, was so severe that the damage was irreversible.

"They said that her lungs are completely destroyed. There's irreversible damage — that it's just not going to happen."

Bettina had numerous underlying health conditions including diabetes and also suffered a heart attack and underwent quadruple bypass surgery two years ago.

Lerman's condition was so bad they had picked out her casket and headstone as they prepared to say goodbye.

"It was the end of the line."

But on October 29, the day they planned to remove her from life support, one of her doctors called.

"He's like, 'Well, I need you to come here right away.'

I was like, 'Okay, what's wrong?'"

"He goes, 'Well, there's nothing wrong. Your mother woke up.'"

"I dropped the phone because we were going to be terminating life support that day."

Andrew said she didn't suffer any organ failure and that no one really understands how she's doing so well.

His mother can breathe on her own for a few hours at a time with some oxygen support, instead of a ventilator.

"She knows where she is, who she is — she's as sharp as a tack," he said.

"Usually, when somebody comes out of a coma like that, they say that the patients have delirium where they're very confused. From day one, she hasn't experienced any of that."¹

How do we even make sense of that???

It was described as a miracle.

Hope says - the hope we have in Jesus - God is at work in the world.

Never be persuaded otherwise.

And yet we know people still walk in darkness today.

“What kind “darkness” to people find themselves in today?”

Tell the person next to you.

Emotional darkness.

The depression and anxiety Althea talked about last week.

A blue day can turn into a bleak week.

Relational darkness.

Where relationships are strained and there's tension in the air or even relational breakdown and break up - a spouse leaves, a parent no longer talks or child refuses to see their parents.

¹ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/covid-19-delta-outbreak-woman-wakes-up-from-two-month-coma-on-day-family-were-to-turn-life-support-off/KW6NOXYEPAMDJKGOCWFJBHS5WI/>

Spiritual darkness.

Spiritual darkness has to do with being separated from God.

It's having an inner void. It has to do with meaning and purpose; asking "Why am I here and where am I going? What's the point of it all?"

When you don't have answers to those questions, when you really feel that void, you are lost and you are walking in darkness and it is horrible.

And one of the things that dies in darkness is hope.

The great danger is then is that we then turn to counterfeits.

Why so many people become disappointed is they are so emotionally invested in the wrong things.

Sally was born beautiful – there's no other word for it.

And she realised very early on that she could wield power through her physical attractiveness.

But something flipped in her life in late teens and early twenties.

Sally found herself moving from one partner to another, being rejected and repeating the cycle all over again.

She would say that without a man in her life she felt invisible.

Sally also found that she couldn't bear to be alone and found herself in relationships with men who were abusive.

She said these words: "Men were my alcohol. Only if I was on a man's arm could I feel good about myself and face the world."

Sally was driven, compelled and restless by the pursuit of romantic relationships.

Her great hope was that some man would meet her deepest needs, will fill the void within.

But no ordinary person can bear the weight of that.

For Sally it was seeing what Jesus had done for her and how much he loved her so that if she ever met a guy who was interested in her she would silently say to herself, "You may turn out to be a great guy, but you can never be my life. Only Christ is *my life*."

Jesus is the one who says that whatever darkness you are facing, he will lead you on into the light.

Hope in Christ is often too about a deep unfulfilled desire.

What is that for you this morning?

It may relate to family - a spouse, sibling, child or parent who stumbling around in darkness but you long for them to see Christ's light.

It may be something about yourself - some longing that only you and God know of.

It might simply be that on Christmas Day - for once - all would go well, that everyone who get along with each other(!).

Whatever it is, take some time to place safely in the hand of Christ.

Amen.