

12.3.23 – First Sunday of Advent – HOPE

With Communion

“Hope Springs Eternal”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

¹ Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
² As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
⁷ No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.
⁸ Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

Leader: These Prophetic Words of Hope Are of God!

All: Thanks be to God!

Mark 13:24-37 (NLT)

²⁴ “At that time, after the anguish of those days,
the sun will be darkened,
the moon will give no light,

²⁵ the stars will fall from the sky,

and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And he will send out his angels to gather his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.

²⁸ “Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ In the same way, when you see all these things taking place, you can know that his return is very near, right at the door. ³⁰ I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene before all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.

³² “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. ³³ And since you don’t know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!

³⁴ “The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. ³⁵ You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. ³⁶ Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. ³⁷ I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!”

Leader: These Words of Preparation Are of Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Oh God, our help in ages past, we worship you today with Scripture, prayer, song, and even decorative space. Help us to begin this Advent season with love in mind for all four weeks. Yes, Lord, we begin with Hope, so we especially pray for that in our warring and violent world. Let us surrender our egos and desires to you this season and recommit to studying your word. Let us remember our legacies of faith, your love and teachings demonstrated through the service of others, despite our sadness or the burdens. Help us to share our abundance with others, especially the HOPE of your salvation. Speak to us in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Advent has begun and we can now officially say it, or in some work settings, we must say Happy Holidays, even though Christmas décor started showing up at Halloween! Thank you to those who were able to decorate yesterday; we had a lot of fun, good conversation, and hard work. As in year’s past, a few more touches will appear each week. For those of you who couldn’t make it, our usual

designer, Lee Ann Woodcock, couldn't be here in person, so we used smartphone and iPad technology to "livestream" so to speak on Facetime! The ladder team worked with Lee Ann by video phone calls to artistically place the ribbons! And our decorating team did all the rest!

And thank you too to our Mailbox Angels, with two new Angels (you know who you are!) who donated two hours for our new, pop-up card ministry, sending out Christmas and greeting cards to over 75 people! They also got to meet Keegan and her husband, FACETS volunteers, who offloaded the delivery truck to help with the diaper distribution program for mothers in need here in Annandale.

On Friday at the standing-room-only Celebration of Life service, we witnessed a demonstration of the Advent LOVE of God embodied in his servant, Jack Caffrey. People of all ages, diversity, and from all walks of life were there: young, mature, rich, poor, Freemasons, Military, Twelve Step fellowship, counselors, clients, extended and immediate family, the church, and secular. Many did not know each other but some did; all knew Jack and most knew Debbie! He embodied the words LOVE and SERVICE. Three kinds of love were visible: *eros* (the romantic love in a marriage based on their clean yet passionate photos!), *phileo* (brotherly/sisterly love), but mostly I saw and heard stories of *agape* love (equal, everlasting, and sacrificial love) demonstrated in the stories of Jack's love and work for hurting people.

These stories are perfect illustrations of why Jesus Christ came to earth as incarnate (human and divine) God—to serve others. He worked through Jack, through the volunteers of FACETS, and through many of you this week alone! It was a busy week for the church, and oddly a good

way to begin our Advent season together with a little sadness, but mostly laughter, joy, and gratitude. All that we did and do weekly in ministry activities and all that I heard in the various testimonies on Friday was about service and love. Personal notes, expensive diapers, and Jack's counseling experience, strength, and hope that he shared with what one person said had to be over 20,000 people in his lifetime! All are tangible expressions of HOPE: helping others imagine a more promising, healthier way to live, a reason to get clean and sober, reassurance that someone cares, and for some, a real motivation to get out of bed each day. That is a relevant ADVENT interpretation for our world today.

The Isaiah passage was written for the Israel exiles in Babylon who felt **their** situation was hopeless; yet they recalled how the Lord had rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, so they prayed to him again. Because they had intermarried with the heathens of Babylon and worshipped some of their pagan gods (small "g"), they were "unclean" according to Levitical law, living sordid lives of luxury and sin. They blamed the nations (*it's always easier to blame the government!*) but not themselves at first; eventually as this prophecy foretold, they sought forgiveness for their sins, their spiritual uncleanness (verse 5b), weaknesses (verse 6b), and poor prayer lives (verse 7). Much like us, they needed God's faithfulness and mercy, as we usually pray when we take communion as we will later this morning. Remembering past deliverance and sacrifice helps the people and us to repent and to feel God's presence. They and we recall God's divine power, his creative goodness as the potter or the designer of our lives and reaffirms our and their love for him while seeking his protection. God's response, as we will see these four

weeks, is hope and peace which yield joy and love, a love that cannot be “cancelled” even in death and suffering; a love that bears inequity, injustice, and pain to save our eternal souls.

In the Mark passage, the prediction of hardship and persecution reflect what will come for Jesus; his humanity is relatable yet protected by the love of his Father God. His divinity, however, is explained here in Mark. The darkness comes first and because of light’s absence, the divine light of Christ will be even more visible! Twelve step language speaks of addiction’s rock bottom as that darkness before the light of a Higher Power can be discovered. The fig tree parable warns the disciples to watch for the signs and to be ready for Christ’s return. We cannot be found sleeping! That’s what Advent is all about – we’ve made the focus only to prepare for Jesus’ birth, and that is good and gives us the joy of Christmas. But what if we made the focus eternal life here on earth through sharing our Christian hope, agape love, and generous service to others? Wouldn’t our soul’s eternal life in heaven be secured? Public service is not for everyone, and I’m not advocating works without faith, but it is never too late to love and serve others. The combined life experience in this room alone, much less our Missions Center, is over 1000 years of experience, strength, and HOPE!

The sermon title comes from the Poet Alexander Pope who coined the famous expression in his 1732 work “An Essay on Man: Epistle I”, in which he wrote:

*“Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar;
Wait the great teacher Death; and God adore!
What future bliss, he gives not thee to know,
But gives that hope to be thy blessing now.”*

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
 Man never is, but always to be blest:
 The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,
 Rests and expatiates in a life to come."*

Pope was a popular English writer during the 1700s. He expressed his Christian (Catholic) faith through his writings and in light of God's good design for the world, the poem argues, humans have a duty to focus on the good that exists – such as eternal hope. The Gospel writer Mark through Jesus' words, almost scares us into that hope, and we know not when Jesus will come again, so we must anticipate that time by preparing others as well as ourselves. Love is a better motivator for hope. The love of a family, for instance. The love of a spouse, or the love of a church family. May we be the physical embodiment of hope for those around us and for new people we meet! Are you ready to meet him now or at his return? . . . let's talk if you're not sure. Amen! ||

Please pray with me. All powerful loving God, we thank you for all you give us so generously: hopeful, loving relationships, and the inspiring words of Scripture. Help us to reach out to those we may not know well to share the hope of Christ. Hope springs eternal because of you and your love of us. Help us to **share** your good news and loving mercy with those who need and let us take a moment to repent and recommit to you as we prepare for Communion, a remembrance of how you delivered us from evil. It is in your Son, Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**